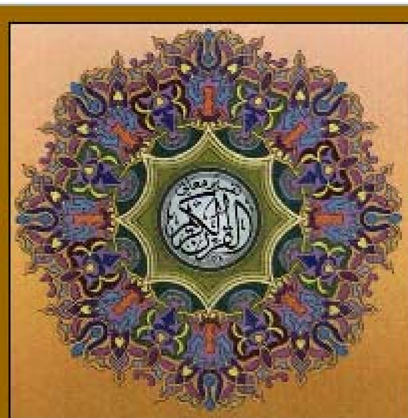


When Imran learns about his mother's illness, he wants to offer her the ultimate gift...
The gift involves a pious Muslim woman who was presented to him as a potential future bride.
Soon, their life is torn apart.
He is compelled to forget his past.
Syakirah must decide about the most crucial decision in her life.
Both struggle between charity,compassion, duty and faith.
Will they reach out to make the gift a reality, and maybe find, at last, happiness?

The Gift
An Islamic Tale

Written by
Sister Nur Taqwa

CHAPTER 1

Saleha smiled at the young nurse who accompanied her out from the doctor's office. She felt calm. She was glad that she still had 6 months. Both her doctors said sometimes miracles happened and a patient lived longer. "Human plans but, Allah is the best Planner of all", she whispered to herself. If Allah willing she could have more time. "That's what Ani always says", she said to herself again. She was so grateful to Allah for granting her a gift of a friend like Ani. Ani had always been there for her family since Kamal's death. She always reminded her the way to Allah and it had made her stronger to face even this unwelcome news. At 54 Saleha looked peaceful with her graceful figure, her scarfed head partially covered with a lacy white long hijab. Her sharp facial feature and light colored skin made her look younger than her age. She felt content and grateful for what Allah had blessed her with.

Saleha got into her car. Then, she picked out a folded leather item from her handbag. It was Kamal's wallet, which she always carried with her. She took out the small photos of her children and smiled. Looking at those pictures always lifted her spirit to live and face the world. She whispered, "Alhamdulillah". She started the car and drove out of the hospital area. Instead of driving ahead, she made a turn. She drove towards the beach, which was not far from the hospital area. She parked near a tree and opened the door to let the mid-morning breeze in. She stayed in the car looking towards the sea. "SubhanAllah, so beautiful… Alhamdulillah, I'm still here to appreciate this".

The sound of small waves hitting the pure white sands was a rhythm to her ears. The rhythmic sound was familiar. She had heard that many times before. Those days were the best time with Kamal and the children. Soon, she would be with him again. But she would have to leave the children and the beach, which had captured their memories. The beach that witnessed the happy times they all shared.

She could still see her children running on the beach laughing and talking. Imran was now 34 and he had been the CEO of KS Holdings for the past 5 years. He was like his father in his character except more serious looking than Kamal. Even so he was a totally different person when he was around people who were close to him. He had an impressive look with his typical Malay man height, short dark curly hair and heavy brows. His slick back combed hair matched perfectly with his heavy brows. His deep dimples, Kamal's dimples Saleha thought, had always been his attractive feature. They made a big difference to his brooding facial expression every time he smiled or laughed. He always avoided talking about marriage saying that he wanted to take care of his mother and siblings. Saleha remembered how strong he kept himself together during his father's funeral. He was shocked but never cried a tear since the time they received the call from the police on the night of Kamal's tragic accident until the funeral ended. He shed no tears…at least not in front of anyone. He said the family had to cling together now that their father was gone. He made a promise to look after all of them and he really had kept his promise.

Imran's younger brother was hardworking like his brother but he was more of a cheerful person. Iskandar, three years younger than Imran, always loved to make others laugh. He was taller and thinner than Imran. His short straight hair and oval facial feature made him resemble more of Saleha's facial features except the hair. His glasses and long neck made him look boyish of all her three sons. He is the accountant at KS Holdings. He and Imran were very close and had been working side by side since Kamal's death. Two years after the tragic incident, Iskandar got married. Imran helped Saleha with the wedding. Kamal would have been proud of his eldest son Saleha thought.

Hanim, a younger version of Saleha but with Kamal's dimples just like Imran, was 22 when Kamal died. She was affected terribly by her father's death. She was very close with Kamal. She had a couple breakdowns and Imran was there by her side the whole time through the hard times. Since then they had grown closer than ever. Saleha was amazed at how Imran was holding up during those painful times. Hanim was a computer programmer at ITM in Melaka. She was engaged to Sufian. Saleha smiled to herself remembering the first time Hanim told the family about Sufian. Imran had a long talk with his sister about it.

Then, there was Hidayat, Saleha's youngest child. At 19, he was a cheerful, active and ambitious young man. He looked a lot like Iskandar except for his curly hair. He was very athletic among the three brothers. He was studying Journalism at a college in Kuala Lumpur. Every time she went to KL she would visit him. When Hidayat enrolled at the college, it was Imran who accompanied him and Saleha. Flashing back on all these, she felt touched for all the blessings from Allah. She felt so proud of her children,

especially Imran. She could not have managed the family alone if it was not for him standing beside her through these 5 years.

The sound of a car interrupted her thought. It was Ani, her best friend. Saleha had called and asked Ani to meet her there. Ani knew about Saleha's illness. She had been accompanying Saleha to University Hospital in Kuala Lumpur from time to time. Ani owned a Muslim clothes boutique. Her business had always been the reason every time they went to the hectic city. Today, she went to the General Hospital in their hometown to get the latest result of her condition. Her doctor at GH and Dr. Norman at UH had been in contact for months now.

Saleha looked into Ani's eyes and broke the news to her best friend. The woman had been her friend since they moved to Johor Baharu twenty-five years ago. Holding Ani's hand, they walked to a bench.

"Thank you, Ani", Saleha began. "Thank you for all that you've done for me and my children...for always being there for me especially...giving me the courage and praying for the strength for me to face this ordeal."

Ani watched Saleha and she could sense Saleha's calmness even after the distressing news. But she was not surprised because that was something that she had always admired about Saleha. She always looked calm. "Sal, you know how much I appreciate our friendship. You're like a sister to me. We are like one family. Your children are like mine."

"I know and that is why I need your help", Saleha looked into Ani's eyes again, searching for an agreement. Deep in her heart she already knew what the answer would be. As if confirming what was in her friend's heart, Ani responded.

"Of course, I will do anything I can. In sha Allah. Is this about the children? Have you told them?"

"No and I don't intend to...well, at least not yet." Saleha turned to face the sea. The small waves moved in rhythm with her calmness but a strong will was inside her.

"But, Sal don't you think it's time for them to know. You're their mother and they love you. At least it could prepare them for any...". Ani looked concerned. She knew the family was very close. It had become even more since Kamal's death. She admired and respected the strong bond in Saleha's family….the loyalty of the children.

Saleha faced Ani and said, "I know, but right now I can't tell them yet especially not to Imran". In a deep strong voice, Saleha continued. "He has done a lot for the family, ever since Kamal's death. He always wants to be strong for me and for his siblings. That night is still fresh in my mind...he was trying so hard not to breakdown. And since then, he has thrown himself into work and more work. He has taken care of me, Iskandar, Hanim and Hidayat for so long. I know I can count on him when that day comes. No doubt he would be there…always… for Iskandar, Hanim and Hidayat. Just as he did for me when Kamal died. In sha Allah, he will."

Silence. They both watched the sea. Their heart beats matched with the rhythm of the waves…which looked calm as they moved towards the beach but after they hit the white sand, they went back into the sea…continuos without an end. The same was felt in both women's hearts and minds. They felt the urge to reveal the "secret" to the children, but telling them would not change Saleha's condition. And the woman didn't want to drag the family into the unhappiness and uncertainty of the illness. And they knew Imran well not to tell him yet.

Ani saw Imran grow up into a fine man. She knew almost the whole chapters of his life. "I always see Kamal in him... strong in facing life and believe in himself. And, like his father, family is so important to him", Ani said.

Saleha's friend had known her son since he was nine years old. She remembered him as a quiet but easy-going little boy. He was like any boy of his age except a strong loyalty in him. When the other boys would play with friends, leaving behind the siblings by themselves, Imran would not leave his behind alone. He was also very protective of his brothers and sister.

Turning to face Ani, Saleha said, "That is why I want to do something for him before I finally closed my eyes, In sha Allah. And I need your help to do it".

Ani quickly nodded in response to her friend's request. "What about Iskandar and Hanim?", asked Ani.

"I don't want to worry Iskandar", Saleha replied and added, "He has Marina and the twins to take care. And Hanim, I don't want her to be driving back and forth checking on me…you know her when she's worried. And Hidayat…this would be too much on him and would affect his studies."

Ani agreed and asked Saleha. "What is it that you want to do for Imran?"

"Well, I know this may sound wishful but I'm his mother. It's every mother's wish. I know you would want this for him too.

"You want to see him get married", Ani said as if reading her friend's thought.

Ani nodded in compliant and said, "Only then will I tell him and the others about my illness, In sha Allah." Saleha smiled and at that moment Ani noticed she looked different...serious and very determined about what she was saying. She seemed happy and did not look like someone who was dying at all.

"My dear friend, In sha Allah, I will help you", Ani responded and then smiled..

Saleha got up and looked down at Ani. Almost whispering, she said, " I know I can count on you, Sis. Thank you, Alhamdulillah!" Saleha returned the smile.

They both started walking towards Saleha's car. Ani explained that she was going back to her hometown in the village for her niece's wedding. Ani invited Saleha to go with her.

"It would do you good to get some fresh air in the country." Ani suggested with a smile.

"Oh, Ani...I don't know...it's a family thing. I don't think...".

Ani stopped walking and interrupted her. "Sal, you are part of my family. My sister would love having you for her daughter's wedding. She has met you and she likes you. Come on...just three days. We can stay longer if you like. Hey look, maybe we could talk about this plan of yours while we're there".

Saleha said she would call Ani later. As Saleha was getting into her car, Ani stopped her.

"Sal, who knows maybe your wish for Imran will come true this weekend." Ani said jokingly with a twinkle in her eyes. A small laugh escaped Saleha's mouth. "I could be right, you know. I mean ...not that I have anyone particular in mind. Just that at weddings, there are usually many...". Before she could finish her sentence, Saleha cut in:

"Don't tell me we are going to pick one of the girls for Imran at this wedding?" Saleha continued laughing.

"Well...the thought did cross my mind but you know what I meant...."

"Thanks for the thought, Ani. I know you meant well. I'll give you a call, In sha Allah. When exactly is the wedding?".

"A week from today but we can leave a few days earlier". With that they left the beach.

As she was driving, Saleha smiled to herself as she recalled what Ani had said. She thought the whole idea was funny. But, at the same time she knew Ani could be right. In fact, that was how she met her late husband. It was her neighbor's wedding. Kamal was the groom's best friend. With that memory lingering in her mind, she said to herself, "Well, Ani, I think I'm going with you, In sha Allah!".

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"Well Mr. Imran Hakim, I guess we have a deal here".

"Yes, indeed". Imran shook hands with Mr. Chow, the representative from the company that KS Holding was trying to get a business contract with. "I'll make sure the paperwork is done by this week. We'll give you a call when we can finally seal the deal, Mr. Chow". Mr. Chow and his assistant asked to leave and Imran walked them to the door. Later he picked up the phone.

"Assalamualaikum, Iskandar. Hey, it's finally done. We got the contract", Imran told his brother.

"Alhamdulillah…good! Congratulations, big brother!".

"C'mon, Iskandar I could not have done it alone. We both did a good job...as usual. Alhamdulillah". They both laughed. "Hey, let me buy you lunch!", Imran asked.

"Oops, I can't. I've promised Marina. We have a lunch date today. Her mother is looking after the kids. But I'll take a rain check, bro".

"Well...okay. Say salam to Marina". They hung up. Imran looked at his watch. It was almost 12 noon. He promised to call his mother about her doctor appointment. Just about then the telephone rang.

"Assalamualaikum pal, want to grab some lunch", Umar said at the other end of the line.

"Great! I thought I'd have mine alone. See you at the usual place...say in about half an hour, In sha Allah. I need to make a quick call first", Imran replied.

"See you then, In sha Allah. Assalamualaikum".

Imran dialed his home number and Saleha picked up the phone. She knew her son would be calling at this time.

"So, how was the appointment, Mom?", Imran asked his mother.

"Oh...Alhamdulillah…everything's fine. I've a clean bill of health, dear".

"I'm glad Mom, Alhamdulillah. Oh, I think I'm coming home early today. I was thinking may be I could take you out to dinner tonight...a date, mom". Saleha chuckled.

"Hmm…a dinner date... What's the occasion?", Saleha teased her eldest son.

"Hey, does it have to be an occasion to take my own mother out to dinner?".

"Well, dear, for the past three months you've been staying late at the office. I forgot the last time we went out together with the family".

"Actually, our company got a new business contract today. Alhamdulillah. I've been working for two months to get it. Now that it's ours, I'm taking a break. So, what do you say, mom?"

Saleha laughed and agreed. "Alhamdulillah, dear. Okay, but Imran, one day you have to find a real date, you know...".

"Okay mom....I'll talk to you later, In sha Allah", Imran said abruptly with a small laugh. They hung up but both knew that they had just touched on the most avoidable topic.

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Umar glanced at his watch. Imran was five minutes late. He decided to order for both of them. Just then walked in Imran. He approached Umar with a salam and sat.

"Sorry, Umar...the traffic. You've ordered?".

"Yeah, the usual. Hope you don't mind".

"Whatever, I just don't feel like eating by myself today".

"How come? Isn't that part of your routine when you don't have business lunches?", Umar asked playfully.

"Yeah, but today I just feel like celebrating. Remember the contract I've been working on for the last two months? Alhamdulillah, we got it!".

"Alhamdulillah, congratulations pal! So, I guess lunch is on the house then?", Umar teased him smilingly.

"You bet!".

As they were eating and talking, a woman approached them. "Assalamualaikum. Excuse, me. Mr. Imran Hakim, right?".

"Yes, waalaikumussalam", Imran said with a polite smile and got up.

"I'm Melissa...Melissa Anuar..."

"Oh yes...Dato' Anuar's daughter, right? We met at your father's office, I think?", Imran said.

"That's right. Nice meeting you again, Mr. Imran". Umar got up and smiled at her.

"Nice to meet you too. This is my friend, Umar Shukry", Imran introduced them.

"I'm sorry to interrupt. I just wanted to say hi", Melissa apologized.

"Oh, it's okay", Imran responded.

"Care to join us?", Umar invited her.

"Thank you but I'm meeting a friend".

"Okay. Maybe next time, In sha Allah. Say salam to Dato' Anuar", Imran said.

"I will, In sha Allah. Enjoy your lunch Mr. Imran, Mr. Umar. Bye". Melissa left.

Umar smiled at his friend

"Did you mean that?", Umar asked.

"What?", Imran asked looking surprised.

"About the 'next time'. She seems nice".

"Don't even start Umar. You know I was being polite. Her father is a very

influential person".

"Right...right…it's business as always. Imran, I'm sorry to say this but when are you going to enjoy life a bit, huh?", Umar asked with a concerned voice.

"Doesn't this look like I am?", answered Imran with a question, raising his thick eyebrows. Then he smiled at Umar, flashing his dimples.

"Well, besides business...a little bit more on personal side may be...", Umar replied in a condescending voice.

"Where are you going with this Umar?", Imran said, feeling a little uncomfortable.

"C'mon Imran. I know you like what?...14..15 years now? Not since...you know... you had a relationship. Why not now?"

"I'm not all up for it, Umar...not yet. After all, what's the rush?"

"I know but look at you. You've been blessed with so much…Alhamdulillah! You have almost everything you want in your life...a family who cares a lot about you...a satisfying career. There's just one thing missing. A person who would love and care about you as much as you would. And I do mean other than *her*".

"My mom's the one, then!", Imran replied abruptly.

"Imran...".

"You know something...it's weird that you mentioned this. My mother said something like this too today. Did I miss something here?"

"Well whatever your mother said, I think it's about time that someone reminded you about this".

"Umar, this is getting way serious now. Can we continue this some other time? I'm trying to enjoy my lunch, you know. And you'd better not spoil this or lunch would be on you instead", Imran said with a laugh.

Umar knew his friend was good at avoiding this subject. He shook his head and smiled. Then, with a sigh he said, "Whatever Imran... but know this, things will never change unless you let yourself change first. May Allah open your heart, pal!"

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Imran was driving home when he remembered what his mother and Umar had said that day. He had heard that many times before. Even when his father was alive, he used to tease Imran every time he mentioned a woman's name he was dealing business with. But today was the first time he had heard it this year. This year would be 10 years since he lost her. He looked at his watch. It was almost 6 p.m. The sun would set soon.

Imran decided to drive to the beach. He liked coming to the beach. The beach had captured a lot of happy moments of his life with her and his own family. He left his car and barefooted he headed for the beach.

It was peaceful here he thought. The beauty of Allah's creation made him so small. Surrendering to the glory of the Creator, he whispered, "SubhanAllah". He walked along the beach. He could see the sun was setting. It reminded him of the last time she watched one beside him. His wife would have loved this place. He closed his eyes and pictured her face. Her eyes, her beautiful, soulful eyes. He had been lost in them so many times. Her smile. He loved her smile. He would steal the moon if he could just see her smiling at him just one more time. The wind swept around him and he remembered why...why she was no longer in his life. Then he remembered what his mother said to him a long time ago. "Fight, Imran. Use my strength to fight. And remember "To Allah we belong and to Him is our return (2: 156)". He felt tears rolling on his cheeks. As he slowly wiped them, he whispered to himself, "Ya Allah, why can't I let Kaira go?".

CHAPTER 2

A black Suzuki Vitara pulled into the parking lot of the Language Center at Pine College. A young woman wearing a dark blue long dress with a light gray hijab came out. She was about 5" 4' with a slender body. Her fair complexion stood out in the color of her dress. Her dark thin brows matched her Asian looking eyes with a straight nose and full-lip mouth. They accentuated her fair beauty. Her young facial features made her look 5 years younger than her age but her matured expression overshadowed it. Taking her books and a briefcase from the back seat, she headed towards the Language Center. On her way, she met a couple of students who greeted her with a salam. As she was climbing the stairs to the office of the Language Center, she bumped into her colleague Yasmin.

"Assalamualaikum, Syira".

"Min…waalaikumussalam", Syakirah returned the salam with a tired voice.

"Hey! What's with you? You sound exhausted. And today is only Tuesday", Yasmin said.

"Yeah, I'm wiped out. I stayed up late last night trying to finish marking those test papers".

"I thought you were almost done yesterday afternoon. I saw only a few left before we went home".

"True but I didn't get to continue it until about 11.30 last night. By the time I finished, it was almost 12.30. Actually, there was an emergency...my neighbor...her son fell off the stairs and her husband was out of town. So, she asked for my help to take him to the hospital...12 stitches on the back of his head. I waited in the ER and brought them back home".

Yasmin was not surprised to hear this. She knew her friend well. Syakirah was someone whom you could count on when in time of need. Her kind heart especially with children was known among her close friends.

"I see. Well, our classes won't start until 9.00, so why don't we go and get some caffeine", Yasmin said with a small laugh. Syakirah agreed.

As they were walking together to the main office, they stopped at the notice board. There was a flyer posted by the Language Center about the upcoming Language Camp.

"I heard we're opening it to more students to participate this time", Syakirah said.

"Yeah. I think it's because the last one was quite successful. The head of the Students Affairs Department, Mr. Johan, was impressed", Yasmin explained.

"Alhamdulillah. Last time some students were disappointed because they could not participate. But we won't know for sure yet, right?", Syakirah asked.

"I'm hoping to learn about it in our meeting today with Mr. Azmi because then maybe we could have a meeting with the committee members this Friday", Yasmin said.

"Yeah. That would be great because then the committee would have plenty of time to plan on the details of the activities. Last time was a short notice but Alhamdulillah the whole thing turned out great!", expressed Syakirah. They reached the cafe and had their coffee.

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It was about 12.30p.m. when Yasmin and Syakirah left the office of Mr. Azmi, the head of the Language Center. It was confirmed that the Language Center had decided to increase the number of participants. The two friends stopped by the lounge of the Language Center before going back to their offices.

"Well, I'm glad with the decision made. Hopefully the students who missed the last camping will have the chance to be in this one", Syakirah said with a relief. Yasmin agreed with her. "Camping always gets to me. It reminds me of the good old days. Did I tell you Manaf and I used to participate a lot in camping when we were at the college?"

"Really? I didn't know that. I mean...I know that you love camping but Manaf too?", Yasmin asked inquiringly.

"Yeah, the last one we had was a one-day jungle trekking and treasure hunting in Kedah. It was so exciting. I could just close my eyes and still remember the smell of the nature and the fresh air. We were in the same team. The mission was to find all the clues leading us to the treasure which was an old pair of slippers", Syakirah and Yasmin laughed. "It was fun...", Syakirah stopped and stared at the newspapers on the small table in front of her as the memory ran through her head. Yasmin looked at her. She knew the exciting memory also brought the painful ones to Syakirah. It had been a long time since the last time Syakirah mentioned Manaf.

Yasmin remembered the first time she met Syakirah. She seemed like a happy but quiet person. Through time, as their friendship developed, Syakirah became more open to Yasmin about her life. Among other things she shared with Yasmin was her relationship with Manaf. They met during a Student Association meeting at their college. He was her senior. They became close friends. When Manaf left for Australia to pursue his degree, the friendship continued through letters and they finally realized they had fallen for each other. She was sad when the college had told her that she was accepted at a university in the States. During her final year at the college, Manaf was having problems with his studies. They were both sad when he finally quitted, and came back home. She was glad to see him home but unhappy because they would be apart again when she had to leave for the States. Syakirah used to say that if only she had stayed, they would have still been together. But Manaf wanted her to go and pursue her studies. He told Syakirah to do it for their future. But this decision was the beginning of their break-up, slowly piece by piece. Losing Manaf made Syakirah turned completely to Allah for peace and spiritual strength. Syakirah once told Yasmin, "Allah guided me through the hard time. I'm a better stronger woman now. Alhamdulillah".

> “And the likeness of those who spend their substance seeking to please
> Allah and to strengthen their souls is as a garden high and fertile; having
> rain falls on it but making it yield a double increase of harvest and if it
> receives not heavy rain, light moisture sufficeth it. Allah seeth well what
> ever you do” (Al-Baqarah: 265).

From what Syakirah had told her, Yasmin believed that the Syakirah she knew now was different from the one who had had a relationship with Manaf.

"Syira….", Yasmin called.

Syakirah snapped out of her thought. "Hmm…?", Syakirah answered and turned her head to face Yasmin. "What?"

"Nothing. Sorry to interrupt your thought but I guess I know what you were thinking. And before you upset yourself with it, I had to bring you back to the real world".

With a questioning smile Syakirah asked, "And that would be what?"

"To be frank, Manaf...", Yasmin answered as she looked into Syakirah's eyes.

"Well, it was nothing really...all this camping and...him...just came up like that in my mind. But it was just a...brief thought of what used to be...that's all. What happened was for the best and Allah decided that".

"And put thy trust in Allah and enough is Allah as a Disposer of affairs"
(Al-Ahzab: 3)

"Well, okay...if you said so. Truthfully, I just don't like to see you looking hurt by the thought of him...of your past", Yasmin said. She believed that Syakirah was over Manaf but she felt she needed to remind her friend of it when something like this happened. Syakirah was a strong person, in faith and emotionally. That she found out after Syakirah had lost her mother a few years back. Yasmin was amazed how Syakirah held on during the difficult time. She saw Syakirah coping with work and family. Yasmin was the one person whom she confided in during that time. Yasmin was also her first friend to share the good news when her father remarried.

"No I wasn't hurt or anything. Just a flash of sweet memory". Syakirah paused before continuing, "Min, it was a long time ago. I'm all past that now, okay".

Syakirah smiled reassuringly at her best friend but Yasmin could see a glint of sadness in her friend's eyes. She knew Yasmin cared a lot about her. Yasmin was right. The memories used to hurt her but she'd rather think of the good ones. What happened then was for the best for her and Manaf. "See...I'm all smiling here, Mrs.Yasmin!".

As they were talking, A.J, the office boy told Syakirah there was a phone call for her. It was from her stepmother back at home. Her grandmother (her late mother's mother) was sick.

"Mom, it's not easy for me to leave my classes in the middle of the week like this. Can't it wait till this weekend?" explained Syakirah. She and her stepmother had grown to love and respect each other since the elder woman became a member of the family.

"She really wants to see you, Syira", her stepmother sounded pleading.

Syakirah felt guilty for taking this lightly. "Okay, Mom. I will try to get 2 days off, In sha Allah".

"I'll tell her you'd be coming home very soon dear", her stepmother sounded relief.

"I'll see you then Syira, In sha Allah. Assalamualaikum". Syakirah hung up and told Yasmin about the call. Yasmin agreed that her friend should go home.

CHAPTER 3

The telephone rang and Ani picked it up. "Hello, Ani's Boutique".

"Assalamualaikum, Ani. It's me."

"Oh, Sal. Waalaikumussalam. How're you today?"

"Good, Alhamdulillah. In fact I've never felt better." Saleha replied in a cheerful voice.

"You really are in a good mood today. Alhamdulillah".

"Alhamdulillah and I'm anxious to know what you have found out from your niece". They both laughed. Ani felt glad to hear her friend was so happy ever since they came back from her sister's house. "Ani, I don't want to talk about this over the phone. So, do you think you can come over sometimes today? Besides I need to discuss a few other things too...".

Ani chuckled and finished her sentence, "...about her, right?".

"Well, yes...just come over when you're free, okay".

"In sha Allah, I'm closing the shop in an hour. I'll drop by your house around 5 p.m., In sha Allah. Is that fine?"

"Great, In sha Allah. I'll be waiting. See you then, Assalamualaikum".

"Assalamualaikum". Ani put down the phone and smiled to herself. She had not heard her friend this excited for a long time. She thanked Allah for His blessing and making Saleha happy again. Ani looked at the clock and continued with her work.

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Saleha sat on the couch thinking of how to break the news to Imran but she needed Ani's help to think of the way to do it. She knew Imran wouldn't like this but also remembered that her son had always listened to her. She just hoped that Imran wouldn't feel like she was doing something against his will. She had a feeling that her son would like this girl. She hadn't met her yet but from what she had learned so far, she felt she was going to like her. She didn't plan this to happen. It all began when Ani was just teasing her in front of Sarah, Ani's younger sister. They were talking about their children.

FLASHBACKS

"Sarah, do you think may be Sal could find a wife for Imran ....", Ani said with twinkling eyes and a small laugh.

"Ani....", Saleha interrupted looking a little embarrased.

"Well, I'm just trying to help. Don't worry Sal...this is just between the three of us. Right, Sarah?", continued Ani. Sarah just smiled at her elder sister and Saleha.

"I don't know, Ani. Who am I to suggest anyone for Imran.", Sarah said. "I'm sure Sal knows better the kind of person for her son. Well, Sal...?", Sarah asked while looking at Saleha with a questioning face. Saleha remembered she was blushing at this time. Just then Sarah's face showed she remembered something.

"Oh...but you know what? I've just remembered someone...Maria's friend. Her name is Syakirah Sulaiman. She called an hour ago to congratulate Maria. They've been close friends since primary school. She's teaching in KL...a very nice girl. She cannot attend the wedding but her grandmother might come".

Saleha and Ani listened to Sarah with much interest.

"Every now and then she comes to visit when she's back home...a little quiet but very friendly once you get to know her", added Sarah.

END OF FLASHBACKS

That was how it all started. Saleha was wondering why she was not married yet. Sarah did not know much about that. After her father remarried she concentrated on her career. Saleha thought this girl reminds her of Imran. This makes Saleha curious about her. She wanted to ask for more information but decided to wait. The next day during the ceremony, Saleha met Syakirah's grandmother and sister. They were nice and friendly and so was Saleha's thought of Syakirah after meeting the two women. Several times she stopped herself from putting up hope too high. But she could not stop thinking about this girl. Now she wished she could meet her.

As Saleha was so occupied with her thoughts she heard a car pulling into her front yard. She went to check and it was Imran and his friend, Umar. Somehow today he came home with Umar. Usually he came home at 6 p.m. but it was only 4.30. Saleha was hoping to have a quiet time with only Ani. She went to open the door to welcome them in.

"How are you Aunt Saleha?", Umar asked.

"Alhamdulillah, Umar. I'm fine. How's family…the children?"

"They are great, Alhamdulillah.", answered Umar.

As they were walking towards the living room, Saleha said, "Imran, you're early today?".

"Oh, we have a game…tennis… today. I left my car at the office. We're here to get some stuff and change.", explained Imran. Saleha was relief in a way.

"May be we all can have some tea before you leave . Umar...?"

"No thanks auntie, I just want to use the restroom and pray solatul Asr. Then, we're off."

"Well, while you two do your Asar prayer, I'll ask Mak Yam to prepare tea."

"Okay, auntie". Umar smiled at Saleha as he followed Imran to his room.

As Saleha was waiting for Imran and Umar to have tea, she heard Ani's car. Immediately she went to meet her outside.

"Ani, Imran's home but he's leaving in a while. I don't want to say anything yet to him. Anyway he's with Umar", Saleha blurted out as soon as Ani got out from the car.

Ani looked at her friend and laughed a little. "You're funny, Sal. You look like a small kid who's done some bad things and is trying to hide them".

Realizing Ani was right, Saleha laughed too.

As they walked into the living room, Imran and Umar were walking down the stairs to join them. "Assalamualaikum, aunt Ani. When did you arrive?" Imran said.

"Waalaikumussalam. I've just got here...to visit your mom. And I see that you're leaving", Ani replied.

"Yeah, Umar and I have a tennis game today." Imran and Umar both smiled at Ani.

"Hmm... you've spent too much time at the office. It's good that you're going out for a game."

"You're right, aunt Ani. I've been trying to get him out of that office for sometimes", Umar joined the conversation. "The last time we played was what Imran... ....two months ago, I think...".

"Hey, c'mon Umar. You know I've been busy these past couple of months".

"Imran...work is work...take time to relax as well...", Ani said.

"As if you don't know my son, Ani....", his mother interrupted. They all laughed. While having tea Imran told Saleha that he might stay at Umar's place for a while after the game. Shortly after the two men left, Saleha and Ani went to sit in the garden.

"So, what did you find out about Syakirah?", asked Saleha.

Ani told Saleha what she had learned about Syakirah. When Ani mentioned where Syakirah worked, Saleha looked disbelief.

"Did you say Pine College?" asked Saleha.

"Uhmm."

"SubhanAllah…This must be destined because that's where Hidayat is studying at".

"Oh...now I know why it sounds familiar when Maria mentioned it to me".

"Do you think maybe I could meet her? Ani, my appointment with Dr. Norman is coming soon", Saleha asked smilingly with a suggestion written on her face.

"That can be arranged when we're ready but is Imran?". The question somehow took away the smile on Saleha's face. She didn't know the answer. She just knew that she had to try. " Ani, I would wait if I have the time but...". Saleha stopped and Ani understood what she was about to say. "I know Sal. I pray to Allah that he is", Ani said and forced a smile to make her friend feel better.

CHAPTER 4

"Hey, Syira! You look like you're in a hurry. Class at 8 this morning?".

" Yes, double period, and I need to get to the office to collect some stuff I asked A.J to make copies yesterday", replied Syakirah. " And you have one at 8 too, right?"

"Yup, 8 to 9, but we still have 15 minutes. So, how was the visit?", continued Yasmin.

"Fine...very, very fine indeed!", Syakirah answered in a weird tone.

"Oops...that doesn't sound like it was...", Yasmin sensed her friend was upset with something.

They reached the office of the Language Center. Before opening the door, Syakirah stopped and turned to Yasmin with a funny look on her face. "Min, I need to talk to you about something after class", Syakirah suddenly said in a low voice.

With a curious look and squinting her eyebrows, Yasmin responded, "Sure...what? Something personal, Syira?"

Syakirah nodded and opened the door. After picking up copies of her class exercises, they both walked to class. On their way to class, they met Mei Lin and they all walked together.

"Syira, when did you get back? How are things at home? Is your grandmother doing fine?" asked Mei Lin.

"I got back last night. And yes, she's fine. Thanks for asking. I won't be back yet if she isn't. Also I got the chance to visit my friend whose wedding I missed".

"Great! The whole visit was good then. Hey, remember about the student I told you both on Monday?", asked Mei Lin.

"The one who scored the highest in the writing test?", Yasmin asked back.

"Uhmm. Hidayat's his name", Mei Lin told her two colleagues and continued. " I went to see Mr. Azmi about my suggestion and he agreed with me. So, the boy's been chosen to be the regular writer in the Daily Pine. And guess what? His first assignment is to write about the coming Language Camp we're going to have. So, he will be seeing both of you about the progress of the activities for the camping. "

"We are having our first meeting with the committee members this afternoon at 3 p.m. I guess you can tell him to attend the meeting.", Yasmin suggested.

Syakirah interrupted." But Min, don't you think maybe he could just come and see us after the meeting. After all this is our first meeting with the committee and the Language Camp is about two months ahead. What we'd probably do today is just to assign sub-committees for each category of the activities. We aren't going to make any final decisions about the activities yet. At least not until the second meeting when the subs will present their suggestions."

"I know but I thought it would be a good idea to introduce him to the committee from the beginning. It can help him work with the committee too in writing the articles", responded Yasmin.

"I agree with Yasmin because he'll be writing a couple of articles updating this event until the big day comes. So, I think it's fine to let him be in the meeting", Mei Lin said.

"Hmm, okay, I guess you're both right", Syakirah agreed with Yasmin and Mei Lin.

"Okay, you two. Mine's here on the first floor. Boy! I'm glad today's Friday.", told Mei Lin as they reached the first classroom of the building." Talk to you guys later!"

Yasmin and Syakirah climbed the stairs to the second floor. "Don't forget Min, see you at the cafe after 10, In sha Allah", Syakirah reminded Yasmin before she entered the first classroom on the second floor.

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Yasmin was waiting for her friend at the café when Syakirah walked in. She approached her friend with a salam. "Let's not sit here, Min. We can sit over there", said Syakirah in a low voice motioning to a table at the corner of the cafe. And abidingly, Yasmin followed her. She knew Syakirah well. This must be something really personal and she didn't want to be interrupted.

Leaving her books on the table, they walked to the counter to get something to eat and drink. Yasmin was anxiously studying Syakirah who didn't seem to want to say anything until they returned to their table. When they finally sat, Yasmin could not wait any longer and asked her friend "So what is this about? I've never seen you this edgy before".

Stirring her coffee with a spoon, Syakirah spilled out what she had to say." I tried to call you last night but nobody was home".

"Oh, Nik and I took the kids to Mac Donald. Then we stopped by my mother's house on the way back."

"Well, I don't know how to start this. You won't believe what happened to me yesterday at my grandmother's house", Syakirah began.

"You said she was sick. That's why you had to leave in the middle of the week."

"Right. Oh, that reminds me I have to give make-up classes. You see... my grandma...hmm (sarcastic chuckle)...she was sick all right...but not after I got there."

"What do you mean?"

"You remember what I told you last month? That she asked me.... like she has always done for many, many times before about when I'm going to settle down. Well she did that again yesterday. Only this time, she won".

"She won? I don't get it."

"Well, you see...she asked me and she gave me an answer as well".

"What?! You mean...".

"Yes. They told me about this man from JB".

"Wait, wait...they? You mean your parents are in this too? What's his name?"

"Of course...who else if not my dear father and loving step-mother." Syakirah stopped to sip her coffee. She looked annoyed but continued, " A businessman named Imran Hakim".

"So, your grandmother wasn't really sick then?", Yasmin laughed a little.

"Yes and no, just a mild fever. I guess she thought the timing was right...she was not feeling well a little and this man happened to be in the picture as well..."

"A death bed wish may be….Are you mad at her, then?". Yasmin was smiling now. She knew about how Syakirah's grandmother and parents had been asking her friend about marriage especially ever since Syakirah's younger sister, Nadhirah, got married last year.

"I'd be lying if I said 'no'. I was happy to see her but I also had to miss classes for 2 days, remember?". Syakirah replied looking a bit annoyed.

"Hey your classes aren't going anywhere, Sis! This is good news, right? In sha Allah, you're about to meet your Mr. Right", Yasmin said with a chuckle.

"Yeah, right...my Mr. Right", responded Syakirah lamely. "Come on Min, don't tell me you are on their side too. I was hoping you would help me think of a reason to get me out of this mess", Syakirah did not like the smile on Yasmin's face. She knew her friend well. Yasmin had always told her to find someone and settle down. "We're in the 90's...close to the Millenium Min. Of course I want to meet my MR. RIGHT, whoever he is...and if such a person does exist in this world. But not this way. I feel...", Syakirah stopped.

"What?… Hey, this isn't a problem that needs a solution. I think it's great. Match making in modern days. He could be the right man for you. If not your grandmother and parents wouldn't interfere in your personal affair. I trust they know very well how you feel in this subject of marriage to not just pick any man available. Congratulations … ...girlfriend! I'm happy for you. I've waited for this for a long time. It's finally going to happen, Syira. In sha Allah!"

"Oh Min... please. You are the last person I thought would agree with them."

"Who else agree then? Does Nadhirah know yet?", asked Yasmin.

"Yeah. And she reacted just like you." Syakirah replied while looking at her coffee. "And Ashraff too. He said he's been waiting for this. He's thinking of a marriage too but he doesn't want to hurt my feeling by getting married first before me. What a dear brother..."

"C'mon, Syira. Don't tell me you're against this because of him again? You told me that you've closed that chapter of your life for good. After all it's been what? 5 years? 6 years? Oh, Syira...you've got to move on..."Yasmin's voice sounded soft now.

Looking straight into Yasmin's eyes, Syakirah began with a firm voice, "No, Min. It's not Manaf at all. That was history. I'm not hovering my life around it anymore. I'm way over him. In a way I regret for letting myself be absorbed in it during those years... …Astaghfirullah. I placed him in my heart… a place belonging only to Allah. May be he was a mistake in my life, after all".

"No, Syira. You did love Manaf and it wasn't a mistake. Allah allowed the two of you to meet but you two were just not meant to be together".

"But now it's different. I don't know what...". Syakirah stopped and sipped her coffee again.

"I know what...", Yasmin said abruptly and continued. "...It's been so long since Manaf. It's like starting all over again. You're afraid of what might happen...of investing into someone and losing him. But, Syira, how long are you going to wait? You have to start picking things up again somewhere, some time…. This guy is the what...third since Manaf?" Yasmin remembered Syakirah had turned down two marriage proposals. She was not ready then. "Syira, you didn't go looking for him. He appears in your life. It's Allah's work. He knows best. So, don't let this Imran go..."

With a sigh and a forced crack of smile, Syakirah responded. "Funny, Min. You're talking as if I'm already involved with this guy. I don't even know him at all, remember?"

"You think he knows anything about you?" asked Yasmin.

"I don't think so. What I know is my grandmother met his mother during my friend's, Maria, wedding last Friday...the one I told you that I missed. She said his mother was very nice. She was at the wedding because Maria's aunt who lives in JB invited her", replied Syakirah.

"So, how did you get into this whole thing?"

"Well, it's not like they actually discussed about me...I mean my grandma and his mother. That was the first time they met and my grandma didn't know about this whole thing...you know...that this lady was looking for someone for her son. It was two days after the wedding when Maria's mom called my grandma and all this started from there".

In a calm voice Yasmin said ,"I think it's a good start...very different from before. With Manaf you fell in love with him after being friends. But this one it's totally different. He appears out of no where. May be the old saying will be true for you. Love will bloom after marriage. Who knows... Also, remember what you told me about your mother's wish? It's been 4 years now. I'm sure she would be happy to see you get married now. In sha Allah!"

Silence.

Syakirah gazed at the flowery table cloth. Then, Yasmin touched her hand and said, "You're my friend, Syira. And I love you. Just give it a thought, okay. Don't just say 'no' yet. Seek guidance from Allah. Do solat Istikharah. I have a feeling this guy is the right one." Syakirah looked up and gave a forced smile.

"This is funny. For all I know, this might mean nothing...it'll cool off by itself. My grandma just likes to make a fuss over it. It's not like anything is confirmed."

"Do you want it to be?" asked Yasmin.

"Min, I still don't like the idea. Let's just drop this for now, please...".

"Well...if you say so".

"I do...I'm happy with the way things are right now. I have peace… Allah has granted that to me. Alhamdulillah!", Syakirah responded.

Yasmin let go a sigh. She smiled and repeated, "Alhamdulillah".

"Oh by the way, are we still going to visit the camp this weekend to check on the site for the treasure hunt game?" asked Syakirah trying to change the topic.

"You're changing the topic Min....but yes. Nik and the kids are coming too, In sha Allah. We can have a small picnic there".

"Good, that sounds cool. I'm all up for it, In sha Allah!". They both smiled at each other.

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Imran was on the phone when there was a knock on the door. He wondered who it could be because his secretary would not let anyone in when he was on the phone. And he did not have an appointment on Friday. He paused his conversation to let the visitor in. It was Hanim. He was surprised and smiled at his sister. Imran signaled with his fingers to invite Hanim in.

"Okay, I'll get in touch with you very soon. Bye", he hung up and walked to Hanim. He held out his hands for a salam. Hanim accepted and kissed them. They hugged and sat on the couch in his office.

"What do I owe for this visit?", he asked lovingly.

"Am I in the middle of something big? I can...", Hanim asked back.

"No...no. Nothing as important as a visit from my sister", Imran interrupted and they both laughed. "So, what brought you here, little sis? Have you seen Mom, yet?"

"Not yet...I came straight to your office. But she's the reason why I'm here first. I was worried about mom".

"Ohh...her doctor appointment, you mean?"

"Yeah".

"You could have just called me".

"Abang Imran, I have this feeling. I don't know what but I just feel like she's not telling us something. The last time I was home, she looked like she had something in mind. I tried to ask but she said it was nothing to worry about. You know mom...she's good at not making us worry even when something is worrying and upsetting her".

"Well, I talked to her after her doctor appointment and she said everything was fine. Alhamdulillah. She even looked very much better since then. Last week she went to KB with aunt Ani. Her niece got married. I guess the trip did something good for Mom because she looked great since then. Alhamdulillah!".

Hanim was relief to hear what Imran had said. "Alhamdulillah. Now I can breathe better".

Imran got up and went to his desk. He looked at his watch. "You worry too much little sis. Now, it's almost 12 noon. I promised Mom to have lunch at home today after Jumu'ah prayer. She'd be surprised to see you". Hanim walked to Imran's desk.

"Ohh...Suffian sends his salam. He was going to drive me here but he had a meeting this morning. So I took a bus".

"Wa'alaikum salam. How is he?".

"Good, Aalhamdulillah. Oh my God, I promised to call him as soon as I got here safe. Can I use your phone?".

"Go ahead". Imran smiled at his sister as she was talking to her fiance on the phone. She knew how protective Imran was of her. Hanim remembered how many times he had asked her of her choice before her engagement to Suffian last month. After she hung up, Imran said, "How long will you be here?".

"Not long. I have a meeting coming up on Monday next week. So I have to get back by Sunday afternoon".

"I'm going to KL on Sunday. I can drop you off on my way there, In sha Allah".

"Alhamdulillah, thanks!", Hanim said cheerfully. Imran smiled at her.

"We should get going now, sis".

"In sha Allah, I'm right behind you, big brother!", they both laughed and left his office.

CHAPTER 5

There was a knock on the door. Syakirah looked up from her reading. "Yes". The door opened and a student entered.

"Assalamualaikum, Miss Syakirah. Can I see you for a second? It's about the article on the Language Camp. I just need some finishing touch before handing it in for printing."

"Waalaikumussalam Hidayat...please come in and have a seat. I'll call Mrs. Yasmin ".

"Actually, Miss Syakirah, I went to her office already but she was out."

"Okay then...what is it that I can help you with?", Syakirah asked him.

"I need confirmation about the lecturers in charged of all the activities to be held."

"Oh that. Well, up to now I only have this list", showing a short list of names to Hidayat. " I'm still waiting for the complete list. I'm sure we'll get it by this afternoon, In sha Allah. You can come and check up later, In sha Allah."

"Okay, thank you. And another thing...I was wondering if we are going to allow outsiders to drop by the camp during the camping. I mean, like parents or the students' relatives."

"I cannot say anything about that...I'll have to check with the Language Center and the Board of Committee of Students' Affairs. I'm meeting with the head of the Language Center in an hour. I'll ask her about this, In sha Allah."

"In sha Allah. I'll come later to check, then".

"In sha Allah. If I'm not around, just go to Mrs. Yasmin."

"Thank you very much for your time. Assalamualaikum.", Hidayat thanked Syakirah with a polite smile and left her office. Syakirah continued with her reading until Yasmin entered her office.

"Assalamu'alaikum...., what's up? I thought you said we're going to have a meeting with the Head today?", Yasmin asked Syakirah.

"Waalaikumussalam. Yes, in fifteen minutes...oh, by the way, Hidayat was here asking for some info on the camping. I told him to check up later this afternoon. Will you be around then? I have to go to the administration office at 2 p.m. So, I might not be around when he comes back".

"Fine, I'll be in my office, In sha Allah. So, let's head to the Language Center now. We don't want to be late", Yasmin said and they both left Syakirah's office.

"Any news about Mr. Imran, Syira?"

"Good that you asked. I received a call last night from Maria...my friend from home. Well, she told me that her aunt, who is a friend to Mr. Imran's mother, called her."

"So, what did Maria say?"

"She was asking Maria about where I work and some other stuff about my education background." Maria also said she suggested they meet me myself."

"When?", Yasmin asked excitedly.

"When what?...Her aunt didn't say when. Anyway I don't like the idea. I feel like I'm being spied on or something...".

"Maria meant well, I'm sure".

"I know that. I'm not exactly saying that she is spying on me. I just don't like all these...finding out things about me behind my back".

"What about your grandma?"

"Thank God, I haven't heard from her since the last time I visited her. I almost thought this thing has ended until Maria called me. But I think there's something cooking between my parents and my grandma."

"Like what?"

"Well, I called home after talking to Maria. They said my grandma came over and asked about me. They said she was just concerned about me".

"May be Mr. Imran's mother called your grandma?"

"I don't think so. If not, why didn't my parents tell me. I think she was just curious because nothing much happened since Maria's wedding. She was afraid that those people have changed their mind about me", Syakirah said with a laugh.

"You think this is funny?" asked Yasmin.

"I'm not happy about the spying part but the whole thing is kind of funny, Min. Anyway, I'll let you know what will happen next in this 'story', In sha Allah", replied Syakirah, still laughing. Yasmin shook her head slowly while smiling at her friend.

CHAPTER 6

Imran got into his car to go home. It's 4.00 p.m. He didn't usually go home this early but today Saleha asked him to. He was wondering what was up. His mother didn't say much on the phone. He tried to guess but could not come to any possible explanation. As he entered the front yard, he noticed Ani's car. On his way to the house he touched the car and felt it was still warm. That meant she had just arrived. Did his mother invite her too? If so, for what? As he opened the front door, he could hear the women's voices in the living room. Saleha saw him walking in.

"Assalamualaikum", greeted Imran.

"Waalaikumussalam", answered the two ladies returning his salam.

"Something special brings my two favorite ladies together?", asked Imran sensing that Ani must know whatever that was going to happen. He knew how close these two women were. He loved Ani like his own aunt.

"Why...does it have to be a special reason for me to visit you and your mother?" Ani asked back jokingly.

Imran smiled at Ani. "It's good to see you Auntie Ani...", replied Imran. "I'll go change first".

"Ani, I think he could guess something's up", Saleha said in a low voice.

"Well, be calm Sal, there's nothing to worry", responded Ani with light smile to calm her anxious friend.

"I'm not. I just don't want him to get upset. You know this is not his favorite topic", explained Saleha with a worried look.

"He loves and respects you. You're his mother Sal. How could he possibly react?", asked Ani trying to put the matter into perspective.

"I guess I think too much. It's just that ...it's been a long time since I last spoke to him about marriage... Am I being selfish, Ani?". The question left a sad look on Saleha's face.

"No, you're not And even if you are, it's for his own good. We're not going to force him, Sal. We're just going to suggest this to him. Then if he's okay with it, we'll go and meet Syakirah, In sha Allah". Ani faced Saleha directly. Her friend's face seemd relaxed when she said this.

"Are you sure Maria won't mind?", asked Saleha looking a little hopeful.

"Well, Maria said she's willing if Syakirah is", answered Ani with a smile.

"How will we know Syakirah is willing too?"

"Just leave that to me, In sha Allah. We need to hear what Imran thinks first."

Imran went to the living room and joined the women. He decided not to say anything until they began first.

"Tea, dear?", offered Saleha.

"Yes, thanks, Mom". Imran smiled at his mother and sat on the couch. They all talked for a while about his work. Then Ani said, "Imran, can I ask something personal?".

"How personal, Auntie?".

"Well, I've known you since you were small. I watched you grew up from a little boy to a successful businessman. So, there's one more thing I 'd like to see...".

"Let me guess...see me get married...am I right?". Imran smiled at his mother and Ani.

Saleha replied, "Imran, your aunt Ani is not the only one who wants to see that. I know this is not your favorite subject but I really would like to see you get married."

"Mom, I know but I think I want to see Hanim get married and Hidayat graduated first", explained Imran which sounded like an excuse to the elder women.

"But there's nothing wrong if you get married before all those happen".

"I'm not sure if I'm ready for it...", replied Imran politely with a smile.

Ani saw a disappointed look on Saleha's face. She knew that Saleha was trying her very best not to upset Imran. She also knew that Saleha would not ask for anything from Imran for herself.

"Imran, what if I said I have found someone nice for you", Ani said with a smile.

"Ahh...playing a matchmaker, huh, Auntie?" Imran replied with a small laugh. "And who could this unfortunate girl be, In sha Allah?", he continued with a question.

"The girl would be fortunate enough to have you...or maybe you would be unfortunate for not having her...In sha Allah", Ani said casually but with a hope in her heart.

"Ohhh, I see...so this must be some girl, then...Anyone I know, Mom?", asked Imran smilingly to his mother.

"The question is would you like to meet her?", Ani cut in.

"As much as I don't like the idea, I guess I'll play along as long as no one is going to force me into anything that I don't like". Imran cracked a smile.

"So, is that a 'yes', Imran?", Saleha asked and gave an anxious look to her son and her best friend.

"For my mother and you too Aunt Ani, I'd do anything...In sha Allah, but I won't promise anything...".

"Alhamdulillah. Fair enough...", responded Ani and they all laughed. Saleha was relief. She felt a little bit awkward for asking Ani do most of the talking. But she thought this would make Imran see how much this meant to her. "I'll set the date and we'll see, In sha Allah."

"Okay Aunt Matchmaker. Whatever that makes my mother happy, In sha Allah", Imran responded. "You still haven't told me who she is".

"Her name is Syakirah Sulaiman. That's all I'm telling you for now", Ani responded. Imran just smiled at both women.

After talking for a while about work and the children, Ani left. Imran was about to leave for the study room when Saleha stopped him and sat next to him. "Imran, are you sure you want to do this?".

Imran looked at his mother lovingly and smiled. "Mom, like I said if it makes you happy, I'm okay with it. But again I can't promise anything. I know how much this means to you. If not, you wouldn't have asked Auntie Ani to do the talking. And she was good, wasn't she?", Imran added jokingly. Saleha chuckled at his remark and said:

"I'm doing what is best for you. You've done so much for the family since....and now as your mother I want to do something for you and I hope it will bring you happiness, In sha Allah". Saleha felt tears in her eyes. Imran knew what she was referring to.

Imran grasped his mother's right hand. "Having you as a mother is the best thing. Alhamdulillah. I feel blessed. We're a family and nothing makes me happier than seeing this family happy. I'll do anything for that. That was the promise I made and I intend to keep it forever, In sha Allah."

Saleha felt touched by what Imran had said. She knew he would say that. She was just worried because he was always busy with work and didn't seem to care much about his own personal future. She knew it had been almost ten years now since he lost Kaira. He had always been opened to Saleha about his personal life until his father's death. Since then he had not talked much about himself.

"Imran, can I ask one question?".

"Mom...since when do you have to ask for permission to ask me about something? You can ask me anything. We've always been opened about everything... well almost everything".

Saleha nodded and said, "Yes, but I know you very well when it comes to your personal life. You used to be very opened about it when your father was alive. But now, it's like you have shut me out of that part of your life".

"I'm sorry, Mom...I never meant to do that. The one thing that I've always remembered that you have taught me is to always be opened about your feeling...to never keep things because they can slowly eat you up from inside. It's just that since Dad had gone, I've felt like I need to be the one to shelter you, Iskandar, Hanim and Hidayat. Your feelings, well-beings and anything to do with you guys should be first in my priority list...always, In sha Allah".

"Imran, I know all that...Alhamdulillah…that is the one thing about you that reminds me the most about your father but you're not your father. You're his and my son. You're entitled to your feelings and well being too...just like Iskandar, Hanim and Hidayat do. You're being unfair to yourself by living your life for us and not including yourself in it. Or is that the only reason?".

Imran looked down at the floor and Saleha knew what he was thinking. But she needed to ask him this question. "Is it Kaira?...because if it is, you have to move on, son. You cannot bury yourself in work forever because of that. Remember, Allah determines everything for us. There are things in life that He does not want us to have…they are just not meant to be ours. But not having them doesn't mean we should deprive ourselves of other things He has reserved for us…things that we deserve to have. When your father died, there were seconds after that I thought I had lost everything. Then, I remembered Allah has given me you, Iskandar, Hanim and Hidayat. Even though I don't have your father with me, I still have a part of him in my children. It made me realize I have something beautiful and meaningful to live for. And that is a blessing from Allah".

Imran listened to every word Saleha said. A part of him wanted to deny but he knew what his mother said was true. For years he had been living with the memory. It had become a part of his life. When his father died, the shock and the responsibility for the family had made the memory of Kaira bearable. He in fact made himself believe that Allah had made it disappear…that he was over it. Somehow the memory was too painful that every time he let himself free from it he felt he could not survive without reliving the fond memories. They were always with him to lessen that painful one. He prayed to Allah a lot, seeking His guidance to let her go. In the end he just knew Kaira and his father...these two people would always be with him forever.

"Mom, I know what you mean and I never meant to shut you out of my life. You know I could never do that...Ya, Allah… I've tried mom...I do...but the pain just won't leave me. When Dad died I thought it was too much that I believed that Allah has made me forget her, but little by little it came creeping back. So, the

only way is to pray that Allah would give me strength to face life. And I can concentrate on my work and my responsibilities", Imran said. His eyes glistened with tears.

Saleha just looked sadly at her eldest child...how strong and confident he is on the outside...the side of him he wanted others to see but deep inside only she, his mother, knew his vulnerability, the little boy in him. Seeing this made her hope and pray that Allah would make this girl, Syakirah, help this to end soon...maybe she would finally change her son's life. InshaAllah. She felt strange how she could already have this feeling about someone whom she barely knew.

"Imran, as your mother I want to wipe that away so that you would be happy again but I don't know how to help you. And that makes me sad...especially the fact that you have done so much for us since your father died. I just want you to give me the chance with this one. You said you won't promise me and your Aunt Ani anything...well neither are we...we just want you to give yourself a chance at happiness again...okay?"

Saleha looked into her son's eyes searching for an answer. Imran gave a weak smile and slowly nodded. Saleha smiled back at him with teary eyes. She patted his shoulder and left Imran sitting on the couch. Imran remembered the last day that changed everything in his life.

FLASHBACKS

It was Friday. After the ceremony at the mosque in the morning, they had a gathering at one of the families' houses after Juma'at prayer. Later, after Asr prayer, they visited the beach for the last time. They were supposed to leave for a short honeymoon on that night. Two weeks after that they were scheduled to go home for good, together with some other students who had also completed their studies.

They went by two cars. Imran and Kaira, the newlyweds, shared a car with Tamrin and Farah. Izwan and Ita were with a married couple and their son in another car. The nine of them occasionally had picnics at the beach.

"Will you miss this?", Imran had asked Kaira as they were walking towards the beach.

"Yeah, very much", answered Kaira in a whisper.

"Same here. Thank you", said Imran. He stopped walking and faced his wife.

"For what?", Kaira asked with a smile mixed with a surprised look.

"For willing to spend the rest of your life as my wife, In sha Allah".

"I love you Imran Hakim. There is nothing I want more than to be a good solehah wife, In sha Allah".

"I can't wait to be home and start our life together, In sha Allah. You're mine...forever", Imran said and smiled lovingly at his new wife.

He had proposed to her at that beach during one of the group's regular picnics. Kaira had said that it was a western style of proposal. It wouldn't happen that way if they were at home. Both of their parents gave their consent for them to get married in UK. Their parents wanted to do a big ceremony when the couple arrived home.

"In sha Allah, I am yours forever. I've always been since the day we met. Allah created Adam for Hawa…and he made you for me". They both smiled. She looked the happiest on that last day. But something happened and took that away from her, from him and from the future they were supposed to have.

END OF FLASHBACKS

The phone rang and Imran's thought was interrupted. He went to answer the phone. It was Hidayat.

"Waalaikumussalam, Hidayat. What's up? I was about to do solat Maghrib".

"I'm calling to tell you and mom that I'm leaving for home on Thursday night".

"Are you cutting classes on Friday?", Imran asked in a curious voice.

"Hey! Of course, not. I have one class on Friday but it’s been cancelled".

"Just kidding. I knew you wouldn't do that. So, anything you want me to tell Mom or do you want to talk to her in person? I'm sure she's done praying."

"No, it's okay. Just tell her I called".

They talked for a while before Imran told his brother he needed to do his solat. He was heading to his room when Saleha came down the stairs. He told her about the call. Saleha was happy hearing the news.

After dinner Imran went to the study room. His mind was still on the thought he had before Hidayat's phone call. He closed the door and stood near a big chair facing the window. That was his and his father's favorite spot. He remembered spending most of his time in this room after Kamal's death. He would sit on the chair for hours thinking about his father and the family. Now he was there again thinking about what went down that evening. Suddenly he said to himself, "Can I go through this again, Kaira?".

Imran met Kaira at one of the families' houses during Eid celebration. Both had been at the university for almost 3 years but had never really known each other. But that day was the beginning of their one-year friendship. Summer of that year he was reluctant to go home if it wasn't at his mother's request. When he was at home Saleha noticed her son seemed different. He told his mother about Kaira and was happy that his mother approved of their relationship.

Imran walked to the bookshelf and picked up an album. He opened it and saw the picture of his parents. He smiled at it. He remembered his father teasing him that he wanted Imran to marry one of his friends' daughters. His father was close with Dato' Annuar, Melissa' father. However, he didn't know them then. The tease was only a joke between him and his father. His father stopped teasing him after learning about him and Kaira. He respected Imran's decision. He was looking forward to meeting his future daughter-in-law. But they never did meet unfortunately. Imran remembered telling his fatehr about Kaira.

"You will love her, Dad. I've known some Malaysian girls at the university but she's nothing like them. She's different. She's changed my life".

Kamal was smiling the whole time. "That sounds serious, Imran. She must be really special".

Imran took the album and went to sit on the big chair. "You were Kaira...you were special and will always be". After Kamal's death, Imran sometimes wondered if his father was teasing him or he really had wanted Imran to marry his friend's daughter. But Imran had no idea who the girl was. A few months before his death, once in a while, Kamal would bring up the topic. But they both knew Imran was not into the idea of marriage after Kaira's death.

Imran went to sit at the study table. He pulled the top left drawer and reached for a blue diary. He pulled out Kaira's picture. It was the picture on her graduation day. She was wearing a blue long dress and a white hijab. It was her first picture wearing a proper hijab. Before she had always put on a scarf which covered only the hair. She had decided to wear the hijab a month before their graduation. Imran was not surprised when she told him of her decision. Kaira's family was not religious but while in UK she befriended many good practicing Muslims from Malaysia and other countries. And through the sisterhood bond, she had learned more about Islam. In fact during their friendship, Imran too became interested in improving himself as a Muslim. That was one of the reasons that drew his interest in Kaira. It was the same reason his parents were happy with his choice. Kaira was not only excellent in her studies, but she was knowledgeable in Islam. As he was holding her picture in his hand, his fingers traced her face and he remembered.

*****FLASHBACKS******

"I have a surprise for you tomorrow", she called him the night before the first time he saw her wearing a hijab.

"Give me some clues", he pleaded.

"Only one. It has to do with our future". He learned the next day that she had been thinking about wearing it since after their unofficial engagement. He remembered her reciting the translation of the verse in An-Nur,

> "And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze
> and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty
> and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they
> should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty
> except to their husbands…" (An-Nur: 30)

****** END OF FLASHBACKS ******

Imran put the picture back inside the diary. "I wish you could tell me what to do, Kaira. I wish you could too, Dad". He pushed away the thought and grabbed his briefcase. That was his routine every time he wanted to keep his mind off the memories. He liked reliving the good ones. They made him feel happy even in a short moment but he always stopped before the bad one came across his mind. This had worked most of the times.

CHAPTER 7

Yasmin and Syakirah had just finished their last classes for the day. They planned to have lunch at Pine Grill. On their way back to the office they met Hidayat and his friends. Some students were gathering around the stools in front of the Language Center building.

"Assalaamualaikum, Mrs. Yasmin, Miss Syakirah", Hidayat greeted the two women followed by his two friends.

"Waalaikumussalam, Hidayat. That was a nice piece of article you wrote in the Daily Pine. Miss Syakirah and I were impressed", commented Yasmin about Hidayat's first article.

"Alhamdulillah, thank you. I couldn't have done it better without your help with the input."

"Hidayat you deserve the credit. You did a good job", Syakirah added. Hidayat's friends smiled at him. One of them said, "He's good Miss Syakirah. He's just being modest....." and the other student agreed to that.

"Hey, c'mon you guys...", Hidayat stopped his friends. "My next one won't be
until after the semester break. Hope I could still get your help with the input", Hidayat said to Yasmin and Syakirah.

"Sure, we'd be glad to help, In sha Allah", Syakirah said. "Okay, talk to you guys later". Yasmin and Syakirah headed for the stairs to go to their offices.

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After lunch, Yasmin was on the phone when Syakirah dropped by her office. She sat on a chair facing Yasmin while flipping through the Daily Pine which was on Yasmin's table.

"Okay, honey. Mommy got to go now. Assalamualaikum". Yasmin hang up the phone. She smiled to herself thinking of her four-year-old son. She promised to take him swimming after work but had to cancel since he was not feeling well the night before.

"Must be Ridhuan…", asked Syakirah smilingly. Yasmin explained about the call before asking her friend.

"Have any plans yet for the break, Syira? If no, you could come with us to Sunway Lagoon. We're taking the kids there on Sunday".

"Umm, no thanks. I'm staying here a couple of days. Then I'm going back home to visit my family".

"Staying here...like working full time? Syira, take a break!".

"Don't worry...I don't plan to kill myself working hard”, Syakirah laughed and continued, “ I'm staying because I want to prepare some teaching stuffs for after the break".

"Well, if you change your mind, just let me know. You could come with us and come back earlier than us".

"Thanks". They heard Syakirah's phone ring. She left to answer it. A few minutes later Syakirah came back to Yasmin's office.

"That was Maria. She's coming to KL for a holiday and guess what? Her auntie is meeting her here".

"And they want to see you, right? Is Mr. Imran's mother coming with her Auntie?"

"Yeah...that's what I don't like about this visit. I missed Maria's wedding, so, when she said they're coming I thought I could treat her and her husband something special. But...she mentioned about this other thing, suddenly I have a feeling I'm not going to like this whole visit".

"Well, I don't know what to say except I hope it'll turn out for the best".

"What best?...for whom?...me? or them?"

"For everyone", Yasmin answered teasingly.

CHAPTER 8

Saleha woke up early in the morning. After Fajr prayer she and her helper, Mak Jah, were busy preparing Hidayat's favorite dishes. Imran came down for breakfast and saw all the food on the table.

"MasyaAllah… all these for Hidayat!...What about me?", Imran said jokingly. His mother just laughed.

"Well, I'm not sure what to cook. He said he misses home breakfast so much. I figured I'll just cook the ones that he likes".

"Which are what....5 dishes? Mom, you don't think Hidayat can finish all these, do you? These are more than enough for our whole family", Imran said and sat for breakfast. They both laughed and ate. They had almost done eating when they heard the door bell. Mak Jah went to open it. It was Hidayat. Mak Jah told him his mother was in the kitchen. He told Mak Jah to keep quiet. He went straight to the kitchen.

"Assalamualaikum!", he greeted his mother and brother. They were a little surprised and answered his salam.

"We knew you'd be late, so we started without you. But you know Mom…she only ate a little. She wanted to enjoy the food with you", Imran said to his brother. Saleha smiled at both of them. Hidayat walked to his mother, kissed her hands and gave her a hug. He did the same with Imran before moving to sit next to Saleha.

"Well, that's because Mom really misses eating with me, right mom? See...she cooked all my favorites", Hidayat replied sounding like a little boy. They all laughed.

"Hey, don't you want to clean up first?...after sleeping one whole night in the bus?", Imran asked his brother teasingly. "You might spoil the smell of the food". Imran had told Hidayat to take a flight but Hidayat took a bus with his friends.

"Nope! I already cleaned myself at the bus station. I want to eat first. After all these are all for me. A bath...I can do that later, right mom?". Saleha laughed and poured a cup of coffee for Hidayat.

"Well…Bismillah! Eat your heart out, then. I've to get going now. I'll talk to you later, bro. And Mom, I'll be home early today, InshaAllah. We can all go out for dinner".

Saleha nodded. She knew Imran was going to announce that. He always took them out to dinner on the first day when Hidayat came home from college. After Imran had left, Saleha sat with Hidayat to eat with him.

"So, how's school, honey?"

"School's fine...in fact, everything's great, Mom. Alhamdulillah! I really enjoyed it this semester".

"Anything I should know that makes you so happy?", Saleha asked sensing that there was more that what her son was saying.

"Remember when I told you about my writing? Well, I love this new task. In fact I've been assigned to write a couple of articles about the language camp we're going to have soon. One was published last week. I'll show it to you later. My next one will be after this break, In sha Allah".

"Alhamdulillah. I'm proud of you Hidayat. But, is there something more about this...?", Saleha asked with a smile sensing that there was something up with her youngest son.

"Like what? And what makes you think that there's something more?", Hidayat said while mischievously smiling to himself.

"Honey, I'm your mother...and you're not that hard to read. It's written all over your face. Does this have to do with someone at the college...someone special may be?", Saleha teased him.

With a sigh, Hidayat lamely answered, "Mom...you're hard to keep a secret from. Well, not that it's a secret or anything".

"What is it then?", Saleha looked attentively at her son. Hidayat has never kept anything from her. He was like the younger version of Imran which was the opposite of the present one.

"She's not what you think, okay Mom", Hidayat began as Saleha listened to him smilingly.

"Ohh...what do I think, dear?", Saleha teased her son. Smiling, she continued, " And you said she...?", Saleha asked with a query look.

"I know what you're thinking, Mom. But it's not even the least close to that. I respect her a lot. She has helped me a lot with this writing that I'm doing...".

"Uhuh...so, she's one of your lecturers I guess?", Saleha interrupted. She suddenly remembered Syakirah. Ani told her that Syakirah taught English at Pine College.

"That's a good guess Mom. Her name is Miss Syakirah Sulaiman but I don't have a crush on her, okay...".

Saleha stopped short for a while but tried not to look surprised. Hidayat did not notice anything. "So, how is she like? She must be really good to you for you to respect her that much. But then again as a student you should respect all your lecturers, right dear?".

"Yeah. But I always feel like I know her well. You know....she's someone like Kak Hanim". Saleha smiled. Hidayat was comparing Syakirah to his own sister.

"Hmm. That's great. Now it won't be hard for you to get help with your writing, then". Hidayat agreed with his mother.

"Right! So, stop thinking about this crush thing, okay. When I met someone special you'll be the first to know. I promise!", Hidayat said with a grin. Saleha just smiled and lightly shook her head.

****

It was almost 5 p.m when Imran walked into the house again. Saleha was setting tea at the dining table. She told him that Hidayat went to visit his friends who live two blocks from them. Placing his briefcase on the small chest nearby the dining table, Imran joined his mother for tea.

"He must really be full of energy for not sleeping at all after that long trip last night", Imran commented on his brother. "He usually would be sleeping at this time. So, something has changed I guess, huh, Mom?". Imran smiled to himself.

Saleha made a small laugh and said, "Well, all I know is he was pretty excited when he was talking with Alan on the phone before he left to meet him. I overheard him telling Alan about the article that he had written at the college. But, again , Imran, when have you not seen your brother excited about his writing, especially when all that he could talk about this whole morning was his new post at the college, well that's what he calls it".

"Yeah, I've been wanting to talk to him about it. I happened to meet an old friend a couple of days ago. He's in publishing business and I told him about Hidayat. He told me about a university in UK, which has good school of Journalism. I thought may be...".

Before Imran could finish, Saleha interrupted him. "Imran, are you saying you want to send Hidayat abroad?".

"Well, it's a good school. And Hidayat has such a talent. It should not be wasted I think."

"I know but… Imran, he seems very happy at Pine College. Why change that?", Saleha disagreed. She suddenly thought about Syakirah. She wanted Hidayat to know Syakirah. She felt that Hidayat knowing Syakirah was not coincidental. Allah meant it to happen. She felt as if she was on her way getting her wish come true. Her wish for herself and for Imran.

"I know, Mom. But don't we all want what's best for him?"

"We all do, Imran. And I know you always have the best interest for us in your heart and that includes Hidayat of course. But, I think we should let Hidayat decide this for himself. He's been at the college for almost a year and a half now and he's doing very well. And I like knowing that he is not oceans away from home". Saleha looked at Imran and then to her tea.

Imran noticed his mother was a little bit upset about his idea. He knew that Hidayat and his mother were very close. The thought of Hidayat living abroad must have made her missing Hidayat more than she did now. Even when Hidayat decided to study at Pine College she was hoping that Hidayat would study at one of the colleges in Johor.

"You're right, mom. I must have got over excited myself. May be we can tell him about this tonight". Imran gave a loving smile to his mother. He saw in her eyes that she felt glad when he said that. "Now, that reminds me that I have to call Iskandar. I was supposed to have dinner tonight with Dato' Annuar...but Iskandar is going instead".

"But Imran, you shouldn't miss it. Dato' Annuar is your father's friend. And what about Marina and the twins?"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you that Marina and the kids went to visit her parents. Her folks miss the twins. They left this morning…and Iskandar will probably join them tomorrow, In sha Allah".

"Imran, we can have this dinner tomorrow night".

"No, no. Iskandar and I have agreed to do this. He even said not to worry about Marina. She's fine with this. And Mom, they're not going to her parents' house together not because of this dinner. Iskandar has another important meeting tomorrow morning about the company's account. That's why he's joining later. So, stop worrying, okay".

Saleha nodded in relief. Imran smiled at his mother. The last thing he wanted was his mother having guilty feeling over having this dinner.

> "Thy Lord decreed , that ye worship none save him,
> and that ye show kindness to parents..." (Bani Israel: 23)

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"So, where are we eating tonight? Same old place?", Hidayat asked Imran.

"Unless you have somewhere else in mind. It's your pick".

"Well, Alan told me about this new place. They have all sorts of seafood there. So, Mom, how does seafood sounds? Okay?", asked Hidayat.

"Sounds good, dear".

"Seafood, then!", Hidayat cheered.

"Yeah! Sea food, here we come!", Imran continued and they all walked out the door laughing.

The sea food restaurant was not in the area where they live. It took them about 20 minutes to get there. The restaurant was indeed new. Everything looked brand new and tidy. There were not many people yet when they arrived. They chose a table facing the sea. The night was beautiful. They were enjoying their second dish, deep fried shrimp, when Imran asked Hidayat about his studies.

"Well, I'm having a wonderful time this semester. I mean I really love this writing job. I get to put into use what I've learned and what I've been wanting to do all these time. And that is to put my creativity on paper. And the people at the college...wow!.. they are so wonderful too. I mean I can talk on and on about this whole thing, you know".

"I can see that obviously...", Imran said with a smile. He has never seen his brother looking this excited before. May be his mother was right. Hidayat should stay there and complete his studies as planned. But, he wanted the best for Hidayat. This school in UK sounded great for his brother.

"You have my full support, dear", Saleha said.

"Thanks Mom. But, you don't have to say it. I already knew it", Hidayat smiled at his mother. "Well, anything you want to add, Mr. CEO", Hidayat teased Imran.

Imran smiled at his brother. "Well, I think you've got something great going on. But then I've always known you would make it. Ever since you got your first article published in that magazine I knew you'd go somewhere with your talent". Imran remembered Hidayat's first published article in the Students' Voice magazine. He was in form four at that time. But, he was already showing his writing skill.

Saleha watched as her two sons talked about Hidayat's writings. She hoped Imran would not bring out the topic about the school in UK. She could imagine how it would be if Hidayat were to study in UK. She had to go through that before with Imran. She missed Imran a lot during that time. Hidayat must have realized that Saleha was deep in thought when he caught her.

"Mom...hello...", Hidayat interrupted Saleha's thought.

"Sorry, dear. I was just thinking about the article you showed me this morning. It was good. Imran, you should've seen it...very nicely written".

"I guess I should...it must've been so good if it gets high praise from Mom", Imran teased Hidayat while smiling at both of them. Then in a slightly serious look he continued. "Well, Hidayat, that brings me to something that I've been saving to tell you tonight. There is this university in UK. It has one of the best school of Journalism . I thought may be if you...".

Hidayat interrupted Imran. "If I might be interested in going there? Well, yes and no". Saleha was looking serious at this time. She was praying hard that Hidayat would not agreed with Imran.

"What do you mean?", Imran asked.

"I mean, yes, I was interested. I knew about this school from our academic advisor at the college. And I did give a thought about it. But, no, I don't want to study there. I think I can do pretty well at Pine College. They have a good school of Journalism there. Well, I haven't taken many courses yet but the longer I've been there the more I like about the school. I'm not saying I'm comparing it with that school in UK. I know that one is a prestigious and well-known school. But, what I'm saying is I like Pine College. I like studying there and I want to start my future from there, In sha Allah...well, if there is a future for me in this field".

Imran listened carefully to what Hidayat said. He knew that his brother had a point there. He had a talent. He could make it anywhere if he were given a chance. Just that he thought in UK his brother would have a better place to study knowledge wise.

"I've no doubt on that, In sha Allah. If you keep up the good work I don't see why you wouldn't", Imran said to Hidayat. "Are you really sure? I mean don't you want to give it a second thought?".

"I am sure", Hidayat said seriously.

"I think Imran's right, dear. If Allah willing and if you work hard, you shouldn't have doubt about that at all", Saleha said and smiled at her youngest son.

"Thanks, mom. And Abang Imran, thanks again for the offer. I know you want the best for me. And I respect and love you for that...always. But, I want to stay where I am. I want to continue what I'm doing right now. I might want to go to UK one day to pursue my M.A or something, In sha Allah. You may never know, right". Hidayat looked at his brother and smiled at him.

Imran nodded. He might know what his brother should get but it didn't mean it was what Hidayat wanted. And he respected his decision. Saleha was relief that this was over and she thanked Allah for it.

"Okay. Now, that's done, right? Can we move on to something not so serious. We're scaring these delicious shrimps...see they are cold now", Hidayat broke the conversation. They all laughed.

It was almost 9.30 p.m when they all finished eating. They were about to leave when Imran asked his mother about her trip with Ani.

"You're going to KL, mom? How come you didn't mention it this morning?", Hidayat asked his mother.

"It must have slipped my mind. Well, it's just one of those business trips your Aunt Ani always has from time to time. As usual she'd asked me to accompany her".

"So, what time are you leaving tomorrow and for how long?", Hidayat asked again.

"Well, your Aunt Ani booked the early morning flight. And we won't stay there long. We'd probably be back by Monday morning, In sha Allah. Anyway, you're home, honey. I don't want to miss spending time with you", Saleha said as she patted Hidayat's hand.

CHAPTER 9

"Yes. Go a head with that. I'll be in by 11.00, In sha Allah". Imran hang up the phone. He called his office informing his secretary that he would be coming late. He was sending Saleha and Ani to the airport.

"Imran, your Aunt and I can take a cab", Saleha told Imran. She knew that he had to attend the meeting that he said Iskandar was attending.

"It's fine, mom. The meeting is at 10.30 a.m. I won't miss much. Iskandar will be there. And this is more of his meeting...the accountant of the company".

Saleha nodded.

"So, where's Hidayat?", Saleha asked wondering where her youngest was. Just then Hidayat showed up with newspapers in his hands.

"Mom, Aunt Ani's here", Hidayat told them as Ani ushered in and greeted Saleha and Imran.

"Ani, I didn't hear your car", Saleha said to her best friend.

"No, I took a cab. I sent the car for a service check-up. And Othman had to leave early this morning. So, are we ready?", Ani asked.

"All set, right, mom?", Hidayat answered.

"You sound cheerful. I thought you're going to miss your mother, Hidayat", Ani responded.

"Of course I will, Aunt Ani. But, I'm not a little boy okay. I'll figure out what to do while Mom's gone", Hidayat answered imitating a little boy's tone. The women laughed at him.

Imran interrupted him. "Well, I thought last night you said you're going to catch up with your sleep, right?". Ani and Saleha laughed more.

"That and ...well, something else...", Hidayat responded with a mischievous look.

"Now...that sounds like a plan, Hidayat...", Ani pitched in.

"Do I want to know what that something else is?", Saleha asked with a curious smile.

"Well...you'll see when you come back Mom, In sha Allah", he answered with a grin.

"We'd better not spoil his plan Mom. Let's get going. It's 8.30 now", Imran said. He picked up Saleha's overnight bag as Hidayat did the same with Ani's. As the two guys walked out, Ani stepped closer to Saleha.

"So, are you ready to meet Syakirah? And did anyone get suspicious about this?", Ani asked with a small laugh. Saleha smiled at the first question and shook her head as she was saying, "Not a thing, Alhamdulillah!".

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It was 15 minutes to 10 a.m when Saleha and Ani walked into KL airport. Saleha's appointment at the University Hospital was at 11.00. They promised to meet Maria at 3.00 p.m. Since they didn't want her to know anything about Saleha's doctor appointment, they decided not to check-in at the hotel where Maria and her husband were going to stay.

After checking-in at the hotel, they took a cab to the hospital. At the hospital they had a drink at the canteen while waiting for Saleha's appointment. Ani looked at her friend who seemed to look so calm despite the fact that she was meeting Dr. Norman, the Hematologist, in less than half an hour.

"You're not nervous, Sal", Asked Ani.

"A little may be but there's nothing to be nervous about. We both know this already, right. This is just going to be like one of those check-ups. And I have you with me", Saleha answered in a calm voice and smiled at her friend.

They both knew what she said was true. But they also realized this was not to be taken lightly. Ani didn't want to go into it since Saleha was more excited about meeting Syakirah than to worry about her sickness.

It was almost 12 noon when Saleha finished her check-up appointment.

"Thank you for everything Dr. Norman".

"Just take good care of yourself Mrs. Saleha".

"I will, InsyaAllah".

Saleha had been seeing Dr. Norman for the last 6 months after her doctor recommended him to her. He was a kind man. His full gray beard and square glasses made him look very professional with his tall lanky figure.

"Have you decided to tell your children?", he asked her.

"InshaAllah, soon Doctor. Right now I have something important that I have to see first".

"I respect your decision but I just thought that you might need your children's support during the remaining months".

"Thank you for your concern. I will as soon as the time comes. For now, I want to keep this as a secret". With that Dr. Norman nodded and smiled politely at his patient. Ani just listened attentively without interruption.

"So, you're going back to JB today?"

"Oh, I'm staying here a little while to meet my son's fiancee", Saleha smiled and noticed a surprised look on Ani's face.

"Have a nice time, then".

"InshaAllah. Thank you, again, Doctor."

As they were leaving Dr. Norman's room, Saleha was smiling but Ani looked a little worried.

"Sal, why did you say that to him?"

"It just feels natural to say it", she replied smilingly.

"I don't want to see you hurt if this didn't work out".

"I believe it will, InshaAllah", Saleha said with confidence. Ani felt more worried but at the same time hoping and praying what her friend had said would come true.

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Syakirah was looking at her watch when she heard a knock on the door. She went to open it and there was her old friend, standing with a big smile, "Assalamualaikum, gorgeous!"

"Waalaikumussalam!", Syakirah said almost screaming with joy. They hugged as Maria's husband watched them. "Eddie, come in. You guys...make yourselves at home, okay". They walked to the couch.

"I've missed you so much Syira. When you didn't come for my wedding, I was almost heart broken you know...but it's okay now we're here".

"Yeah. I'm so sorry I couldn't make it to your big day. Congratulations to both of you. But you know what...since I missed the wedding, I promise to make it up by taking you guys out to dinner tonight...well that is if you guys haven't planned anything romantic yet...", Syakirah said teasing Maria and Eddie.

"Alhamdulillah! What a nice treat, Syira. You invited us for lunch...and dinner too?", Maria said.

"Be grateful then. That's what you get for having a friend like me!", Syakirah said and they all laughed.

"I thought Maria said you stay here with a friend?", Eddie asked Syakirah.

"Oh, yes I do. She left two hours ago for a two-day trip with her friends. But she helped me with the lunch you're about to eat", Syakirah replied with a smile. They talked for a while before having lunch.

After Zuhur prayer, Syakirah drove them back to their hotel at 2.30 p.m. After stopping by the couple's suite, Syakirah and Maria left to meet Saleha and Ani. When they reached the hotel where Saleha and Ani were staying, Syakirah looked at Maria before getting off the car.

"Maria, I have to say that I don't like this. You know that I'm doing it because of you and your Aunt", Syakirah said.

"I know. I would feel the same if I were you", Maria responded. "But, you know what? After this meeting you won't have anything to wonder about".

"Wonder?...Why would I?".

"Well, once this is over you don't have to think what could've or couldn't have happened. For all we know, this might be the first and the last meeting ever".

With a small laugh and a funny look, Syakirah said, "What? What makes you think I'd ever wonder about this if I didn't come today?".

"Syira...give me some credits...I've known you for what?....two, three months?", Maria replied. They both laughed.

"Well, you're right...you're right, 'kay. That's my nature. But still Maria...still I wish I didn't have to do this...". With that they got out of the car and walked to the hotel's lobby.

Saleha and Ani were talking when Syakirah and Maria approached them with a salam. Ani hugged her niece as Saleha shook hands with Syakirah. After ordering the drinks, Maria began the conversation.

"Aunt Saleha, thank you again for coming to my wedding".

"The wedding was wonderful. It was a pleasure to be there, Maria. So, where's your husband? Eddie, right?".

"Yes. He's at the hotel. This is a woman thing he said. Syakirah and I did ask him to come", Maria said with a smile.

"Syakirah, so, you're not going home this semester break?", Ani asked.

Syakirah was surprised that Ani knew the college was on a break but didn't show her surprise. "I am but in a couple of days".

"Aunt Ani, Syakirah is a hardworking person. She's been like that since we were in school. No wonder she's a lecturer and I'm just a primary school teacher", Maria interrupted with a laugh.

Syakirah blushed a little and in a teasing voice she said, "Well, it wasn't that all the time Maria. We did have fun too remember?".

"Yeah, we did, didn't we?.... although I think I had more fun than you did...since you were always worried about studies..."

"Now, let's not go into that. You're making me sound like a nerd. I wasn't a nerd, Maria".

"But close to becoming one...", the two younger women laughed as the elder ones watched and joined the laugh. They continued talking about Saleha and Ani's visit to K.L. Then, the elder women asked about Syakirah's job.

"I like teaching at Pine College. It's a good college", Syakirah explained briefly.

"Yes, I've heard", Saleha said.

"Ohh, you do...?". She wondered how much Saleha had learned about her.

"Well, my youngest son is studying there", Saleha replied. This time Syakirah could not hide her surprise any more. Maria didn't tell her about this.

"Oh, really? What course is he taking?", Syakirah asked. Maria looked at her and Syakirah could tell that her friend didn't know about this too.

"Journalism. His name is Hidayat".

"Hidayat? Hidayat is your son?", Syakirah asked with a continued surprise. She thought to herself how much more surprise was in store for her. She never thought Hidayat's similar last name to Imran meant they were brothers.

"So, you've taught him?", Ani took turn asking.

"Yes. When he was in his first semester. He was a good student and still is. He's writing for our weekly magazine. But then, I'm sure you already knew".

Ani nodded and said, "Saleha told me".

"He is so excited about it. It was all he talked about the whole day yesterday", Saleha added.

"He's very talented. I'm sure you've read his article", Syakirah said.

"I did", Saleha responded with a smile. They continued talking. Saleha liked Syakirah. There was so much more about Syakirah that she wanted to know but she thought this was enough for now. She could proceed with her next plan.

"Well, it's almost 4.30. I'm sure you girls have other plans. Besides I promised your uncle to call him at 5.00", Ani said. Syakirah was glad that this was almost over.

"Yes. I think we'd better. I need to get freshen up before dinner tonight. It's a wedding treat from Syakirah", Maria told the two elder women.

"I'll call you tonight, In sha Allah, ...about tomorrow", Ani told her niece.

"Okay, In sha Allah. But make sure to call after 9.30". They said good-bye and parted.

When they reached the car, Syakirah let go a sigh of relief. "Alhamdulillah! Am I glad it's over or what? I'd never do this again. It was worse than going for a job interview".

Maria laughed at her friend. "Syira, never say never. I have a feeling they like you...and might want to meet you again, In sha Allah", she teased Syakirah.

"Oh, Maria....once is enough. It doesn't matter if they like me or not...though I think Mrs. Saleha seems like a sweet lady, don't you think?", Syakirah said.

"Yeah she is. Well, if Mrs. Saleha is nice....and her son, Hidayat is nice too.....that's according to you, okay....I guess, his other son must be nice too, Syira", Maria said with a mischievous grin. Syakirah didn't like what she was hearing. Maria sounded just like Yasmin.

"Whatever Maria...as far as I'm concerned I'm finished with this".

"For now, Syira...", Maria continued teasing her friend.

They drove back to Maria's suite and Syakirah promised to pick them up later for dinner.

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"I like her Ani. I'm sure Imran will too. What do you think?", Saleha asked her friend as they entered their hotel room.

Ani studied her friend. She was amazed how this woman could be so happy while knowing her life was ending soon. She seemed to forget the fact that only that morning they went to the hospital. Watching Saleha made Ani choked up inside to reply to her question.

"Well I like her too", Ani replied with teary eyes. She really hoped it would work out as Saleha had wanted it to. "I hope Imran agrees to meet her, InshaAllah".

"He has to Ani...he has to. This is the only chance I've got. Ya Allah, I'm so glad I met her today. I feel like today was the beginning of a wonderful ending. I just hope I'd be there when the ending happens", Saleha said with a smile. "I'm so excited and grateful to Allah". Ani just managed to smile and nodded in agreement to what Saleha had said.

"So, where are we going tomorrow?", Saleha asked.

"Shopping? Or may be we can go to Bukit Cerakah? I've promised to have lunch with Maria and Eddie. You can join us."

"Okay, In sha Allah...that sounds great".

CHAPTER 10

As they were waiting for Imran to pick them up, Saleha reminded Ani of their next plan. "Don't forget to call Maria tomorrow night, In sha Allah". Ani nodded reassuring her friend. Just then they saw Imran walking towards them. The whole time riding in the car to Ani's house, they talked about the visit in K.L. Imran told them about Hidayat who had been working on something since that morning. It was still a secret. As they drove out of Ani's house, Saleha brought up the subject about Syakirah.

"Imran, there's something I want to tell you. Well, when your Auntie and I were in K.L, we met Syakirah".

With a small laugh Imran asked, "Oh, you did, Mom? How? Or was it part of your plan with Aunt Ani?".

Imran's response made Saleha a little nervous. "Well, ...umm...yes". Imran continued with a chuckle.

Saleha continued. "It so happened that Ani's niece, the one whose wedding I went to with Ani recently, was in K.L. So, since she's a close friend of Syakirah, we asked her to arrange a meeting with Syakirah".

"Hmmm...and she agreed?", Imran was grinning now. He wondered why this person would agree to meet his mother.

"I could tell she did not like the idea. She was uncomfortable. But so was I. Anyway, she's a nice person. In sha Allah, you're going to like her, Imran".

"Mom, how do you know?", Imran asked as he glanced at Saleha. He seemed calm and casual.

"I don't but I have a feeling she's suitable for you…a mother's intuition, In sha Allah", responded Saleha with assurance.

"Now, let's not talk about suitability yet. I only agreed to go along with your idea. I didn't promise to commit myself into anything, Mom", reminded Imran politely to his mother.

"Of course. I still remember that. So, well...she's working at Pine College".

"Hidayat's college?", Imran asked with a little surprise.

"Yeah. You're surprised, huh?", guessed Saleha. She had her confidence back as she remembered what she had told Ani. It was not just mere coincidence that Hidayat and Syakirah were both at Pine College. She believed it was a sign from Allah.

"I guess I am", Imran replied short.

"Well I was too but then it dawned on me that this could be destined...you know by Allah. I mean who would have thought I would meet a nice girl for you and she's known Hidayat all these times". Imran was smiling and shaking his head as he was listening to his mother. Saleha made Imran agreed not to mention this to Hidayat yet.

When they reached home, Hidayat was waiting for them on the porch. As soon as Saleha got out he approached his mother.

"Assalamualaikum. So, how was the visit, Mom?", Hidayat asked eagerly as they walked in to the house.

"Well, I thought you'd know K.L better than I do, Hidayat", answered Saleha jokingly after replying his salam.

"It went well I assume...", he said smiling at his mother.

"Well, not as exciting as what you've been up to, I think", Saleha responded trying to get a hint of Hidayat's secret project. Hidayat just gave a mischievous grin.

Imran looked at his watched and decided to go back to the office after lunch. They all sat in the living room. Imran asked Hidayat about his secret again but he just asked them to wait and see.

"It'll be ready in half an hour. So, why don't you and Mom go freshen up a bit?", Hidayat said and smiled as he walked to the kitchen. Saleha looked at Imran who then raised his eye-brows and shrugged his shoulders.

Half an hour later, Hidayat was flipping through a magazine when both Imran and Saleha came down to the living room.

"So?", asked Imran.

"This way please....", replied Hidayat motioning his brother and mother to the kitchen. Mak Jah was pouring the drinks in the glasses as they walked into the kitchen.

"Walla!...this is the secret project I've been working on", Hidayat squealed with excitement. "Fish curry, fried chicken, Chinese fried vegetable.....cream pudding and freshly washed fruits", he said pointing to each of the dishes on the dining table. Imran and Saleha were speechless.

"So, you did all this, Hidayat?", Saleha asked. Imran had the same question on his face.

"Uhmmm...well, not exactly....Mak Jah here helped me, right Mak Jah?", Hidayat explained looking at Mak Jah. The helper laughed at him and explained how Hidayat had been learning to cook all the dishes since the morning Saleha left for K.L.

"Hmm...a journalist turned into a cook....You're a fast learner, Hidayat. But are these as good as they look?", Imran teased him.

"Let's dig in to know!". They all laughed as they sat around the dining table about to have their "surprised" lunch. While eating Hidayat told them how he managed to get Mak Jah to teach him. Saleha in return explained about her visit but did not mention about Syakirah. Imran just followed what Saleha had told him earlier.

****

Imran looked at his watch. It was past 5.30 p.m. He was driving home but decided to stopped at the beach for a while. After parking his car, he took off his shoes, coat and tie. Rolling the sleeves of his shirt and legs of his pants, he surveyed the area. There were not many people today he thought. He walked to his favorite spot but saw two young men talking. So, he headed for the water instead.

He walked along the beach thinking about what his mother had told him today in the car. He stared down at his wet footprints in the sand. Casually he took a seat on the beach. He stared out into the ocean. The sun was setting. He closed his eyes as the wind swept over him. The wind whispered her name. Her laughter rang in his head.

"Never let me go".

"Ever, In sha Allah", he said to her.

CHAPTER 11

Syakirah was in her room packing up stuff she wanted to bring home when the telephone rang. Lisa, her housemate, said the call was for her. It was Maria. She told Syakirah that her Aunt Ani called her the night before.

"Maria, can't you give her an excuse for me. I don't think I want to put myself in that awkward spot again. Once is enough...please....", Syakirah pleaded when Maria told her that Saleha wanted to see her again.

"Syira, I know. I did try. But this time it's not just Auntie Saleha, but her son too".

Syakirah was silent for a few seconds. "His son? You mean Imran Hakim?", she finally asked and raised her eyebrows.

"I sure don't mean Hidayat", Maria joked and asked back. "So?"

"I can't...I'm going home today".

"Well, it's not today".

"No, I don't think so, Maria".

"Why not?"

"Aren't you at least a bit curious to know about Imran? Because I am, Syira".

"Why doesn't that surprised me?"

"Simple, my friend. Because I love you and I want you to take a break".

"A break?"

"Yeah...a break from being so stubborn may be. And finally letting yourself off guard. You've been guarding yourself for so long. It's time to break the wall. You told me you're over Manaf a long time ago and you're not being picky about guys when you refused the marriage proposal from...what's his name.... So, here's your chance to prove your words, Syira". Maria felt bad for having to say this but she knew someone had to say this out loud. And she was Syakirah's oldest friend.

Syakirah was silent again. She knew every word Maria said was true. However she still could not accept the thought of someone dictating her future like this. She had always being independent in what she wanted except once. When her mother died, she had to listen to the needs of her family. She let go the opportunity to work at a prestigious university in Malaysia, which had always been her dream.

"I think what I need is a break from this matchmaking thing. I know you meant well but...I feel...", Syakirah stopped. She didn't know whether to say what she had been feeling all this time ever since this whole thing began. She didn't want to hurt anyone's feeling. She was hoping this whole thing would just slip away. She even thought it was her biggest mistake in meeting Saleha and Ani that weekend. But then again she remembered Allah knew the best.

"Feel what, Syira?...you can tell me. I can see it's not just a simple "no"", Maria asked curiously.

"I...I don't...I don't like the feeling that I'm throwing myself into this...you know... like a woman without pride who is desperate to find a man... Maria, I'm not going to stoop that low. I don't want people to

think just because I'm thirty something and still single, I could be dragged into this very easily", Syakirah finished her words and took a long breath.

"Is that how you really feel? Syira, you are plain stubborn, do you know that?", Maria laughed a little. "And you let what others think play a role in your life? Since when do you care about what others think? You're the one friend I've always known who doesn't care about what people think especially when you're not doing anything wrong. That's something we've had in common, remember?".

Syakirah acknowledged well about Maria had said. She even recalled the story of Luqman and his son about thinking too much of what people said. You might end up giving yourself discomfort.

"I did not say I care what they think but I don't like when people talk...and they like to talk about something like this. Don't tell me you wouldn't feel the same if you were in my shoes".

"You're right about that. But, if you're going to let this feeling cloud your decision, you're not being true to yourself either".

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that you're a fighter for what you want...you're not a coward".

"And what does this have to do with me not wanting to meet them and be match made?"

"Oh, Syira...of course it has everything to do with that. If you're a brave person like I've always known, you wouldn't want to run away from this. It's like being challenged and you have to fight. If they think they really can match make you and you think they're wrong, so prove it. Prove that you're not someone who they think they can match make. Prove that you have your own mind and don't like others to take care of things for you especially when it involves your future".

"Wow! Since when have you been so wise and philosophical...I mean about love and life?", teased Syakirah with a small laugh.

"Since I met and married Eddie!", responded Maria joining the laugh.

They both were laughing.

"Well, Eddie and you were not match made by your folks", Syakirah said.

"I know....but I'm still right...I mean about what I've just said, right?", Maria asked to confirmed her thought.

Syakirah sighed. "I don't know, Maria".

"You do, Syira".

Syakirah took a deep breath. "Okay, now that you've triggered the fighting part of me, I guess I'll take the challenge", Syakirah responded. She heard Maria chuckled in agreement.

"Good. I'll call you with the details tonight, In sha Allah. Is that okay? I know you don't want your parents to know yet".

"Hey, why don't I wait till you come home. We can meet at your folks' house, In sha Allah".

"I'm afraid not cuz Eddie and I, we've just decided to go to Penang tomorrow. So, we might stay for a while and we won't be home until Sunday, In sha Allah. And you'll be gone by then, right?"

"Yeah...well, just call me tonight In sha Allah, then".

"In sha Allah. Have a save flight home, In sha Allah!".

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Syakirah was happy to be home. But it did not take long until her parents started asking her about Imran Hakim. Right after dinner they asked her about it. She told them about the meeting that weekend, but not the coming one. It was around 9.30 p.m. when Maria called her. She said the meeting was on Sunday at 3.30 at the coffeehouse of Hillview Hotel. Saleha, Imran and her aunt would first go to the college to drop Hidayat. Syakirah kept telling herself that it would be the last meeting as far as she was concerned. She told Maria she would bring Yasmin with her. She made Maria promise not to tell anyone about this meeting, not even Maria's mother. Syakirah knew her grandmother might ask Maria's mother after learning about the meeting with Saleha and Ani.

She visited her grandmother and as expected she was asked about the issue. She explained to her grandmother what she had told her parents. She made sure not to give a clue about the coming meeting. She went out with her sister, Nadhirah, one night and almost told her sister about it. She thought she wanted to share it with her since they were close but decided not to. After all, she was determined to make this coming

meeting the last one she would ever have with Saleha and Imran. When it was done, this whole thing would end. And there would be nothing more to talk about. She just wanted to enjoy her holiday until Sunday came.

CHAPTER 12

After breakfast, Hidayat helped Saleha with her orchid garden. They were talking when Imran walked to his car. Hidayat looked at his brother who seemed to be in a pensive mood. He walked to Imran.

"Abang Imran, will you be home for lunch?", Hidayat asked his brother.

Imran snapped out of his thought. "Hmm? Lunch?…ohh...sorry, Hidayat. I have a meeting at 2.30. But we're still playing tennis today. I'll be home before five, In sha Allah", Imran replied and smiled at his brother.

After Imran left for work, Hidayat continued wondering what made his brother's mood changed. He was fine during dinner the night before. Hidayat went back to the garden. He decided to ask his mother.

"Mom, is something wrong with Abang Imran?"

"What do you mean, dear?", Saleha pretended not knowing. She did not want Hidayat to know about the meeting with Syakirah and as neither was Imran.

"I'm not sure. But something is bothering him. He did not talk much this morning. It was like he has something in mind".

"It must be the meeting he's having today. Dato' Anuar is a very influential man", Saleha hoped this answer would stop Hidayat from worrying about his brother.

"Well...yeah, I guess. I hope it was nothing personal", Hidayat said with a concerned voice.

****

As he was driving Imran thought about what Saleha had told him the night before. He knew he had promised to go along with this idea but the thought of actually going through with it bothered him. "What have you got yourself into, Imran?", he said to himself. He decided just to let it happen. "Why do I let this get to me? It's just going to be this one time after all!". With that in mind Imran smiled to himself.

When he got to his office, his secretary informed him of his meeting with Dato' Annuar at 11 a.m. He did the morning routine, checking all the documents and contracts. While he was busy doing his work, Umar called him. He was supposed to join Imran and Hidayat playing tennis that day.

"Imran, I'm sorry I'm afraid I have to cancel the game today. My kid came down with a flu last night. So, we're taking him to the clinic. Maybe next time, In sha Allah", Umar explained.

"Oh it's all right Umar. Hidayat's going to miss the game with you but he'll understand, In sha Allah".

"Hope so, In sha Allah. He was looking forward to this game. Well, maybe next time when he comes home, we'll set another game date, InshaAllah. Tell him I'm sorry. And I'll try to see him before he leaves for college".

"InshaAllah I will. Err…and Umar, there's something I... ", Imran hesitated of telling Umar about the upcoming meeting with Syakirah. He would wait till after it. "Uhmm…it's okay".

"What? You got something in mind just say it. I'm all ears, In sha Allah".

"Nah...it can wait, In sha Allah. So, I'll see you on Monday at lunch then, In sha Allah", Imran said instead.

"All right...I'll see you then, In sha Allah", Umar said knowing very well that this must be something personal.

After talking to Umar, he checked his watch again and called his secretary to bring some files about the meeting that day. Then he left for Dato' Annuar's office. He arrived 15 minutes early. He was flipping through one of the magazines while waiting when Melissa walked in. She smiled at Imran and walked to the secretary. Then she approached Imran who then got up to greet her.

"Assalamualaikum, Mr. Imran. We met again", she said.

"Waalaikumussalam, Miss Melissa. I guess we do. I've a meeting with Dato'", Imran responded.

"Yeah, I know. Actually I was going to sit in but I have something urgent to attend to", she explained. "Oh, I met your brother last week...at the dinner with my father?", she recalled the dinner Imran missed.

"Oh, yes. I'm sorry I couldn't make it. I had something important on that night". They both smiled.

"Well, nice meeting you again Mr. Imran".

"Nice meeting you too". She looked at her watch.

After saying good-bye, Imran walked to the secretary and then entered Dato' Annuar's office. The meeting took about one hour. When it ended, Dato' Annuar invited Imran for lunch. He told Imran he was supposed to have lunch with his daughter but she could not make it.

"Yeah, I met her outside before I came in. She said about something urgent that she had to attend to", explained Imran. Right then his cell phone rang. He excused himself to answer the call. It was his secretary informing his lunch meeting been postponed.

"I'm sorry. That was my secretary. I guess I can join you for lunch after all".

They talked for a while until it was time to leave for lunch. Imran went to get his car and drove to the restaurant. Dato' Annuar was sitting at their table when Imran walked in. They were eating and talking when Melissa approached their table. She greeted them and told them she finished her work earlier than expected.

"I called home and Mama said you're still having lunch here. I thought to join you anyway because I didn't want you to eat alone. But I guess I was wrong. You already have Mr. Imran's company", she explained to his father and smiled at both men.

Imran explained to Melissa about his postponed lunch meeting. They all ate and talked about business for a while before changing the subject to personal matters. He learned that Melissa started working with her father a month ago.

"I didn't think I would be working with papa when I came back from the States. That's why I worked with J&J Corp. for a year. I wanted to get experience somewhere else. Last time when I met you with your friend, remember? I was meeting a friend who works at J&J Corp. I miss working there but I thought it is time to work with the family. My brother has been suggesting it to me ever since I finished my graduate studies 2 years ago. And Papa said I could learn working here too".

"Honey, you're doing great. For someone who's as young as you are, you're good", Dato' Annuar said to his daughter.

"Papa....", she smiled at her father feeling a little embarrassed. "Mr. Imran, I heard you're a successful businessman. I don't mean to pry but I've heard a lot about your company when I was at J&J. Must've been tough when you first took over the management after your father died."

"It was, but Alhamdulillah I have my brother who is the accountant for our company. We helped each other a lot during the first year. And the people who have served my late father have been very good since the first day we've been there. They've given us full support. So, that has kind of helped us too".

They continued talking about KS Holding. Then it was time to go. Dato' Annuar asked if Imran played tennis because he and Melissa liked the game.

"Well, I'm playing today with my brother. If you're free, maybe we can have a match", Imran told them. They agreed to join him.

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It was 4.00 p. m when Imran got home. Saleha was in the kitchen with Mak Jah. Imran went to them and asked where Hidayat was. His mother said Hidayat was in his room with Alan who came an hour before. She was preparing tea for all of them. Imran excused himself to get clean and do his solat before the game. As Imran left, Saleha felt relief because Imran didn't seem like the way he was that morning. She assumed everything was fine then.

On his way to his room, Imran poked his head into Hidayat's room. He greeted Alan and reminded Hidayat about the game. Hidayat said he would be ready by the time his brother finished his Asr prayer. Half an hour later they all gathered around the dining table having tea. After tea, Alan asked to leave. Ten minutes after that, Hidayat and Imran left for the game.

Imran explained why Umar couldn't make it. He told Hidayat that Dato' Annuar and Melissa were playing the game with them instead. Imran told him about these people.

"So, how long have you known Miss Melissa?", Hidayat asked Imran.

"I've met her twice before. Once was during one of my meetings with Dato' Annuar and the second time when I was having lunch with Umar. How come you're interested in her, Hidayat?", Imran teased her brother.

"Me? Why? I'm not...I'm just wondering because it's not like always I get to see you in public with...you know", Hidayat escaped the tease and eyed his brother curiously.

Imran laughed at his brother. "With whom,... a woman? Of course you haven't because I that’s not me. Well may be a couple of times but they were business colleagues. Anyway how do I have the time for that. I would bore a nice woman with my business talks".

Hidayat laughed with his brother. "But it would be nice for a change. One of these days you're going to meet someone and I'll have another sister-in-law besides Kak Marina".

They waited fifteen minutes for Dato' Annuar and Melissa. Then they decided to start playing. Ten minutes later Melissa came alone. She apologized for coming late and told them her father could not come. He had to stay because his old friend came over. Imran introduced her to Hidayat.

"You look a lot like your other brother", Melissa said to Hidayat.

"You've met Iskandar?", Hidayat asked curiously

"Yeah...at dinner last week with my father. The one Imran missed", she replied smiling at Imran. "So, we're short of one player".

"It's okay, we can take turn. You two go ahead first", Hidayat suggested with a smile.

Melissa beat Imran in the first game. Hidayat won in the second game with Melissa but lost to Imran in the third game. They decided to stop for drinks before leaving the court.

Sipping her drink, Melissa jokingly said, "Were you being modest and let me win, Imran?".

"You weren't bad yourself. I haven't played quite a while...a bit out of shape I guess. But my brother here....".

"It didn't look like that at all just now", Melissa interrupted referring to the last game. "But, Imran's right, you were quick at picking up the speed of the game, Hidayat".

"Well, I've been playing a lot at the college when I have time".

"Where do you go to school Hidayat?", Melissa asked.

"Pine College, KL. I'm going back this Sunday".

"That's a good college, I've heard".

"Isn't there anything you don't know Miss Melissa?", asked Hidayat who was impressed with Melissa.

Melissa laughed. "I happened to read about it in a paper when I was in KL a few weeks ago. I don't know much about it. And what makes you think I know a lot of things?"

"Well, you're good at this game, you know about Pine College and you're also a good businesswoman".

"And you learned that about me from Imran?", Melissa responded with a laugh.

Hidayat just smiled at Imran. Imran could tell what his brother was doing. He was trying to get Imran interested in Melissa.

They left at about 7 p.m. Melissa invited Imran for another game the coming weekend. Imran said he would call her back.

"She's cool, Imran!", Hidayat commented on their way home.

"Yeah, she's nice", Imran said lamely.

"Do you like her? You told me that you've met her a couple of times before", Hidayat said looking very anxious for Imran's reply.

"She's okay. I can see that you like her a lot", Imran replied in a teasing voice.

"Well, I think she likes you a lot too", Hidayat responded, still trying to make Imran interested in Melissa.

"Am I hearing my little brother trying to be a matchmaker, here?"

"What if I am? You two look very friendly, so...", before he could say further, Imran interrupted him.

"She's a good business colleague. End of story".

"You need to loosen up a bit or else you'll stay like this forever".

"Hey, I'm not complaining. My life is fine, Alhamdulillah! And thank you for your concern little brother", Imran said with a big grin to his brother. Hidayat gave up. He knew it wasn't easy to talk with Imran about relationship.

CHAPTER 13

They were about to leave when Imran 's cell phone rang. It was Iskandar.

"Glad that I could catch you", spoke Iskandar.

"What's up Iskandar? We're leaving now. You want to talk to Hidayat?", Imran responded while checking the time.

"No, we had our goodbye last night. This won't take long. Mr. Reese called yesterday while you were out. Mariam transferred his call to me", explained his brother.

"Yeah...he's not backing out the deal, is he?", Imran asked anxiously.

"No, no. He's still with us. I forgot to tell you that last night. He's in KL right now. He said he can meet you there. I gave him your number. So, you should expect a call from him some time today, In sha Allah".

"Okay, thanks, Is", Imran said with a relief.

"Have a safe trip, In sha Allah".

They left the house at 7.30 a.m. During the journey Hidayat talked about his coming assignment for Daily Pine and the Language Camp. Saleha and Ani just smiled and once in a while laughed at his excitement. Imran just listened. Neither of the women nor Imran mentioned about their meeting with Syakirah and Yasmin. They agreed to keep this from Hidayat. Imran was glad with this decision because he was hoping this meeting would be the first and the last. It was like doing a favor for his mother and Ani. They stopped once for a break. It was almost 1.15 p.m. when they reached Pine College. The meeting was at 3.30 p.m. After leaving Hidayat at the hostel, they went to check in at Hillview Hotel.

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Syakirah took a 10 a.m. flight from KB. Her house-mate picked her up at the airport. After lunch, she called Yasmin about the meeting.

"Are you still coming with me, Min?", Syakirah asked.

"I'd never want to miss this, girlfriend. I'm looking forward to meeting this person Imran Hakim!", Yasmin answered excitedly.

"Don't get too excited. This will be the last time I'm going to such a meeting". She filled Yasmin in about her talk with Maria.

"She was right, you know. You can be so stubborn some times...but like she said why care about what other people want to say. This is not the '60s. For what I know who cares if you're 40 years old!".

"Yeah, right...for what I care, the sooner this is over the better...Then I can rest in peace. I'll pick you up at 3.00, In sha Allah".

"In sha Allah, I'll be ready! See you, Syira!"

Syakirah smiled to herself after talking to her excited friend. It was hard to believe her friend was a mother of two with her all the time cheerful attitude.

Yasmin was waiting at the porch when Syakirah arrived at her house. Nik was playing with their children. Yasmin had informed Syakirah that her husband, Nik, knew about the meeting.

They arrived at Hillview Hotel 10 minutes before 3.30 p.m. When they entered the coffeehouse of Hillview Hotel, Saleha and Ani were already there. As they were approaching their table, Yasmin noticed a serious look on Syakirah's face.

"Syira, lighten up a bit. You don't want to show a pout face to those nice people".

"Nice indeed...if it weren't for them, I wouldn't be here...not even if someone paid me a thousand ringgit. For all I care, it doesn't matter how I look. I'm here to prove how wrong this matchmaking is. I feel like I'm forcing every fiber of my being just to be here. I can't wait to get this done and over with".

"You and your stubbornness again. Just let it go for the next couple of hours, Syira. Cool off a bit and try to be nice. Now smile Syira...", Yasmin told Syakirah as the two elder ladies saw them approaching.

"Waalaikumussalam", Saleha returned their salams. Syakirah introduced Yasmin as Saleha did the same with Ani. "Imran will be here in a minute. I don't know what's taking him. He was ready when we left the room...".

Ani interrupted, "I hope he's not doing business here". Saleha laughed a little as Syakirah and Yasmin smiled politely. Syakirah thought to herself, "What a son! I'm here at his mother's request. Yet, he can't even be punctual…Astaghfirullah".

The waiter brought them their drinks. Saleha told them about the trip to KL and Ani asked about Pine College. They all laughed when Ani mentioned about Hidayat and his excitement about his writing task at the college.

Imran saw Saleha and Ani talking to Syakirah and Yasmin. Suddenly he stopped short for a while and studied one of the two younger women from afar. There was something about her that irritated him. He wasn't sure what it was. He continued walking to the table. The women were not aware of Imran approaching them.

"Assalamualaikum ladies. I apologize for being late. I had to take the call", Imran interrupted them.

Saleha introduced Imran to Syakirah and Yasmin. They exchanged greetings and Imran took his seat, which was between Yasmin and Saleha. Imran tried not to stare at Syakirah, the woman whom he felt irritated just about a few minutes ago and he still did feel it.

"Is everything fine, Imran?", Saleha asked her son. "It wasn't anything urgent I hope".

"No. I was expecting the call when we got here. Business...", Imran stopped and smiled curtly at the younger women. Ani noticed a displeased look on Saleha's face at the mention of “business”.

"So, was I interrupting something just now?", he asked changing the subject.

"We were talking about the trip this morning", Ani answered abruptly with a small laugh trying to make the situation a little cheerful. Realizing her friend's effort to change the mood of the conversation, Saleha added, "And about Hidayat".

"You all must be tired from the trip", Yasmin said.

"It wasn't that exhausting with Hidayat entertaining us all the way", Ani responded and everyone smiled at her remark.

"Aunt Ani was right. It didn't wear me out driving to here with Hidayat in the car. In fact, I'm sure he'd be happy to be here considering you two are here", Imran said.

Syakirah had not spoken after they exchanged greetings. Yasmin felt awkward and moved her hand to her side. As she was smiling and listening to Imran, she nudged Syakirah's hand to make her talk. Yasmin knew her being there was not a waste but a saving grace.

"So, you taught him before?", Imran asked both Yasmin and Syakirah.

"No, but Syakirah did. I've come to know him this semester when he started working for the Daily Pine, the college's paper. He's really talented Mr. Imran", Yasmin replied.

"Call me Imran, please", Imran corrected and looked at Syakirah. "What about you Miss Syakirah?", Imran asked studying her at the same time. He couldn't exactly tell what disturbed him so much about this woman.

"I taught him once...his first semester last year. Like Mrs.Yasmin said, your brother is doing a good job", Syakirah finally said something. Yasmin felt relief for a second.

"Of course when he has lecturers like you two", Saleha added. Ani agreed with Saleha's comment.

"Alhamdulillah. We're just doing our job", Syakirah said with a smile at the two women and glanced at Yasmin. Then she caught Imran looking at her. Syakirah felt annoyed.

"That's what we're paid to do", Yasmin added with a small laugh and the three people smiled.

"So, you like teaching Miss Syakirah?", Imran asked Syakirah.

"Syakirah, please...", Syakirah said and continued, "Yes, Alhamdulillah, I enjoy teaching. It's a challenging job...trying to meet the needs of the students while at the same time learning about them".

"What do you mean? You study every student in your class, Miss Sya...er, Syakirah?", Imran questioned her. Ani and Saleha looked at Syakirah with interest.

Yasmin could feel her friend was uncomfortable with all the attention. She had always known that about Syakirah.

"Well, each student has a...I should say unique. You don't have a group of students with similar characteristics and attitudes. As you go along teaching them, you would learn about each student individually. It helps to learn about them...especially their attitudes towards your...I mean my teaching. That's how a teacher would learn about his or her teaching approach...whether it works or not...whether the students are actually learning something or not ... from the students response and attitudes".

"Wow, that's a ... really profound outlook, Syakirah. I wish all teachers have such a perspective...what a good place a school would be...".

"Are you saying that it is a too unrealistic view, Mr. Imran?", she asked feeling annoyed about his statement. Yasmin was watching Syakirah now. She had never seen her friend acting like this. Syakirah would never care less about what other people think about her teaching perspective. What she always cared was the teaching itself. That was more important to her and for her students. Yasmin looked at her watch. It was 10 minutes after 4 p.m. Now it was her who wished this was over.

"I'm sorry if I've offended you. I just thought....", before he could finish his sentence, his cell phone rang. "I'm sorry again, I have to take this. Excuse me". He left the table and went to the foyer.

Syakirah felt relief and less tense but still very much disturbed. She was not sure why she felt ticked off so easily. She thought it could be because she was trying so hard to get 'the proof'. She was wondering what Imran was going to say. She looked at Yasmin who then gave her a "just forget about it" look.

Saleha was feeling uncomfortable herself. She has never seen Imran treating someone, not to mention a woman, like he just did. "Maybe it was nothing", she said to herself to brush away the thought.

"Would you like to have some more coffee, Syakirah...Yasmin?", Ani asked to break the silence.

"I'm fine, no ...thank you", Yasmin replied politely. Syakirah did the same. Just then they heard someone calling Saleha's name. They turned and there was Dr. Norman. Saleha got up. Syakirah noticed a surprised look on Saleha's face. He greeted both Saleha and Ani. Saleha was worried Imran might come. She glanced to the foyer and saw Imran was still on the phone. Saleha invited Dr. Norman for a drink with them but he could not stay long.

"What brought you here Dr. Norman?", Saleha asked.

"Oh, I'm meeting a friend". And you two?", Dr. Norman asked looking at both Saleha and Ani.

"I came to send my son back to college, Pine College. We drove here this morning. I came with my other son. You've just missed him".

"So, is one of these young ladies your son's fiancee ? I remember you telling me that".

Saleha was unsure and wondering at the same time what made the doctor ask that question. "Uhh..yeah...Syakirah. And this is her friend Yasmin". Syakirah was trying to hide her disbelief.

"Nice to meet you Miss Syakirah, Miss Yasmin".

"Mrs. Yasmin"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Yasmin".

"So, you'll be staying here tonight, Puan Saleha?"

"Yes. We're leaving tomorrow morning".

"Well, then I could invite you to my house. I'm giving a small party tonight…a thanksgiving party. I'd be honored if you could come", addressing to all of the women.

"Thank you, Dr. Norman. I'll have to talk to my son first", Saleha was glad Imran wasn't there. She hoped Dr. Norman wouldn't say anything about her health.

"Do come. It's a pleasure to have more friends over and that includes you too Mrs. Yasmin and Miss Syakirah...I don't have to mention....you're coming of course with Puan Saleha, right? That is if she accepted my invitation". Saleha smiled at the kind doctor, still praying he would not mention about her real status to him.

"I'm afraid I have a plan with my family tonight", Yasmin excused herself. "But I'm sure Miss Syakirah is free". Syakirah felt a knot in her stomach and said to herself,
"I'll get back to you Min on this".

"Uhh...In sya Allah", was all Syakirah could say smilingly....trying not to embarrass Saleha but at the same time trying to save herself from the invitation. She was still trying to hide her disbelief of being addressed as Imran’s fiancee.

"Just call me if you could come. You do have my card with you, right?". Saleha nodded.

As Dr. Norman was about to leave, Saleha walked to him.

"Doctor, my son doesn't know about...", Saleha began but was interrupted by Dr. Norman.

"Fine. Don't worry. Patient's record is confidential remember. I addressed you as a friend, didn't I. After all, my wife appreciates your friend's suggestion. She's been to that boutique ever since". They both smiled.

"Thank you...And my salam to your wife. If we're going tonight, my son will know you because your wife knows Ani's friend. And that would be how we met".

"You're welcome and I will, In sya Allah. Hope to see you and your son tonight. Oh...and his fiancee and your friend too. It's almost 4.30. I'd better leave now". They said good bye. As Saleha was walking back to the table, Imran finished his call and walked over to his mother.

"Who was that man, Mom?", he asked Saleha.

"Dr. Norman. His wife is a regular customer at your Aunt Ani's best friend's boutique in KL. We met during one of our visits", Saleha answered abruptly hoping Imran did not suspect anything.

"Wow, Aunt Ani has a good business mind, then", he said with a smile.

"And you too...I thought this was going to be business-free meeting", Saleha finally expressed her displeasure at Imran's phone call.

"I'm sorry mom. Iskandar informed me this morning before we left that this guy is already in KL. We're meeting at 6.00 but I promised you it would be a short one and I'd...".

"Imran...", Saleha interrupted and was upset now. They stopped walking and stood facing each other.

"Please, Mom. I promise I'd make up for this tonight. We'd go out tonight and have dinner...your pick", Imran tried to console his mother. Saleha's face still looked upset but then she thought of Dr. Norman's invitation.

"My pick, huh, Imran", Saleha said, now with a little smile, and Imran nodded. They continued walking.

Meanwhile at the table Ani was trying to explain to Syakirah who was having hard time to swallow the reason why Saleha introduced her t Dr. Norman as Imran's fiancee.

"I'm sorry Syakirah. I'm sure she never meant to make you feel uncomfortable. She must have slipped when she talked to Dr. Norman the last time we saw him", Ani said.

"Aunt Ani, I don't want to be impolite but this is getting too much now...I just hope it won't go out of hand. I agreed to come because I like and respect her and you. She reminds me of ...someone". Syakirah paused and remembered her late mother. Then, she continued,"...but just because I'm willing to show up, it does not mean I'd be...you know...". Ani nodded.

"Syira, I'm sure Aunt Ani is right", Yasmin tried to calm her friend.

"I promise it won't happen again, InsyaAllah", Ani added solemnly.

"Does Imran...", Syakirah's question was interrupted by Ani.

"No and he won't know, In sya Allah", Ani said.

"Thank you. I hope we won't have to deal with this again, In sha Allah", Syakirah looked calmer now but still a little agitated. Yasmin was relief.

As the three women finished their talk, Saleha and Imran reached the table. Saleha looked at Ani as she and Imran were sitting down. Ani gave her a look that everything went well while she was not there.

"I'm sorry. I had to ask Dr. Norman for some details about the party", Saleha explained while giving a meaningful look at Syakirah.

Syakirah knew Saleha was apologizing for more than that. She smiled at the elder woman and said, "It was okay. We understand". Yasmin agreed with her.

Hearing the invitation his mother was talking about, Imran asked, "An invitation?".

Saleha explained to him about the invitation. Ani smiled when she mentioned Dr. Norman and his wife as her acquaintances.

"Imran, you'd promised that we'd go out tonight. So, In sha Allah we'll go to Dr. Norman's house, then", Saleha said to Imran.

"Well, if that is your pick, then yes, In sha Allah!", Imran responded. "What time is the party?".

"8.30 p.m.", Saleha answered looking happy now. Ani, Syakirah and Yasmin watched the two of them.

"Okay. I'd be back a little after 7 p.m., then. Now I have to leave to get ready for my meeting", Imran said as he was getting up. "Well...it was a pleasure meeting you Miss Syakirah and Mrs. Yasmin. Sorry we could not finish our talk just now, Syakirah", Imran continued with a smile.

"Yeah...nice meeting you too, Mr. Imran", Syakirah responded.

"Maybe next time, InshaAllah. And nice to meet you too Mr. Imran", Yasmin said after Syakirah. The three of them exchanged polite smiles.

Suddenly Saleha said, "Maybe you two could continue it tonight...Syakirah, what do you say? I'm sorry that Yasmin already had a plan but you could still come with us".

Yasmin looked at Syakirah who then said, "Well, I don't really know Dr. Norman...". Before she could finish, Imran interrupted casually, "Not only that Mom, she barely knew us. You wouldn't expect her to want to come with us to this party".

Hearing this, Syakirah felt a hot flush rushing to her face. Suddenly she felt awkward and angry by his statement. Instantly she said, "Uhh...you know what...Mr. Imran's right. Anyway, I'd be busy tonight...see...classes start tomorrow. I need to do some preparation".

"Are you sure?", Imran asked her lamely.

"Yes. I think Mrs. Yasmin and I should leave now too." Then looking at the two women in front of her, Syakirah continued, "I'm sure Aunt Saleha and Aunt Ani will need some rest before tonight. And Mr. Imran here has a meeting to go", Syakirah said trying to control herself. She felt Imran was getting more and more to her nerve.

The elder women could sense the conversation was going a little tense. Ani graciously said, "Oh, we're fine. You and Yasmin could stay a bit longer here and talk with us".

Syakirah felt she couldn't sit there even a few minutes longer. Imran's action really ticked her off. She had to leave. "Thank you but I really think we should get going…, Yasmin?", Syakirah glanced at

Yasmin as she was getting up to leave. Yasmin got up. She was unsure what to say but agreed with Syakirah. Imran was watching Syakirah as she was saying this. The elder women could only smile.

"Well, again nice meeting you, Mr. Imran", Syakirah said in a little cold tone. Yasmin said the same but in a more friendly way. They both thanked Saleha and Ani for their warmth company. After a salam they left.

"That was cold Imran", Saleha said to her son and walked away. She felt angry and sad. Ani followed her.

Imran felt a surge of guilt and walked to catch his mother. He did not understand what came over him to act the way he did. There was something about Syakirah the minute he saw her. But he could not put his fingers on it. All he knew was he could not sit at the same table and talk to Syakirah. He saw the two elder women took the elevator. It was almost 5 p.m. He decided to go to his room first to do solat Asar. Then he would see Saleha before leaving for the meeting.

Ani closed the door behind her and watched Saleha standing near the window looking out to the busy streets of KL below. Saleha was angry and hurting. This had been a nightmare Ani was afraid to happen, since the day Saleha called Syakirah Imran's fiancee. Ani knew it would hit Saleha hard if her high hope turned out like this. And it did. Ani's only hope was for Imran to come and explain why he did it. She decided to do solat Asar and left Saleha alone for a while. Later, Saleha did the same. After Saleha finished praying, there was a knock on the door. Ani went to let Imran in and excused herself to let the mother and son talk.

Imran went to sit next to Saleha and took her hand. "Mom, I'm sorry if I've hurt your feeling".

Saleha's anger lessened as she looked into his eyes and saw his sincerity. What she did not understand was why Imran acted so coldly towards Syakirah. "Why Imran? I've never seen you act like that before. Even if you didn't like her, I'd never thought you could be so cold", Saleha began. She still sensed her own anger but tried to be calm. She had forgotten when was the last time she was angry with Imran.

Imran could tell his mother was both upset and angry and it broke his heart to have caused it. He felt like he had just committed a sinful act. A good son would treat his mother kindly.

> “We’ve enjoined on man kindness to his parents; in pain did his mother bear him and in pain did she give him birth…”
>
> (Al-Ahqaf: 15)

He had not seen Saleha like that since a long time. He wanted so much to find her the reason but he could not put into words what he was feeling. All he could tell her was he was sorry for what had happened. "Mom, you have the right to be angry at me. Please believe me...I wouldn't do it intentionally to hurt you. I really feel bad about the whole thing now… I’m sorry".

"Feel bad, Imran? You should feel worse", Saleha raised her voiced a little. She knew her son would not lie to her but she needed to show her anger a little. She wanted him to see she was not wasting his time with this meeting. She was serious about the whole thing. She didn't want Imran to take this lightly, just to please her.

Imran just listened to his mother as Saleha continued, "She was being honest. And there you were questioning her like...". Saleha stopped. Both of them could feel Saleha's anger even though she tried hard to hide it.

"I'm sorry, mom".

"You should feel sorry for yourself. Imran...", Saleha paused. She looked into her son's eyes and proceeded, "I know you weren't interested in meeting her. I'm upset Imran because you blew it to my face and embarrassed her in the process".

"I know, mom...I know and like I said I do feel bad about it. I shouldn't have treated her that way", Imran said. Saleha nodded. Imran continued, "Maybe...maybe I could call and apologize to her". He hoped this would make his mother feel better.

"You'd do that Imran?", Saleha asked looking a little surprised.

Saleha gave him Syakirah's number he got from Maria. "Do you think maybe we could still invite her to Dr. Norman’s thanksgiving party?", she said smilingly. Imran didn't like the idea but the happy look

on Saleha's face made him agree. He would deal with his problem facing Syakirah again. At least he would be doing something for his mother to make up for the mess he did earlier. Imran left and promised to call Syakirah before the meeting.

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Syakirah and Yasmin drove home without talking much in the car. At first Yasmin tried to say something about Imran but before she could even finish her sentence, Syakirah had stopped her. Yasmin understood Syakirah very well. When she was angry, nobody should try to talk her into anything until she had cooled off first.

They reached Yasmin's house and Yasmin invited her in. "I think I want to go home. I'll talk to you tomorrow, InshaAllah", Syakirah said.

"Syira, I'm sorry it turned out this way", Yasmin said.

"Me too. Such an arrogant....", Syakirah stopped herself and quickly said "Astaghfirullah" in her heart. Then she continued, "...I shouldn't have agreed to it in the first place. But, hey, what's done in done. I'll get over it, InshaAllah…like I did before when something unpleasant happened", she made an effort to smile and continued,"This is just to add to that list. Well...I'll see you tomorrow, InshaAllah! Thanks for accompanying me", Syakirah said casually. They said good bye and Syakirah left.

When she got home, her housemate, Lily, had not come back yet. Lily had told Syakirah that she might stay overnight at her friend's place because she was taking a day off the next day. She went to do solat Asar and sat on the couch afterwards. She thought about what happened at the coffeehouse. "Why did I let myself into this whole thing? Haven't I learned enough to believe he could be any better?… Astaghfirullah!… I'd never set myself for a heartbreak again!", Syakirah said to herself. She took the remote control on the television and turned the television on. She was watching the news when the telephone rang.

"Hello, may I please speak to Miss Syakirah", Imran's voice was on the other end of the line.

Syakirah did not recognize it at first and replied, "This is she. May I know who's this?". When Imran introduced himself, she almost wanted to shout at him and hang up the phone. Then, she thought to her self, "I didn't do anything...it was him who acted like a jerk…Astaghfirullah!".

"Syakirah, I apologized for my bad manners at the coffeehouse earlier", Imran began. "I know it was wrong of me to speak to you like that".

Syakirah paused before saying, "Was that what your mother told you? Or did she ask you to call me to apologize?", she responded in a cold tone.

"I understand if you're angry at me. But I speak for myself and my mother meant well with the meeting. It was me who ruined it. I'm sorry". Imran's voice sounded firm but apologetic.

Syakirah felt a little guilty for talking harsh, but she didn't want to let him get away with what he did. "I accept the apology. If there's nothing else, then Assalam...", Syakirah was interrupted by Imran.

"Actually, there is. My mother still would like you to come with us to the thanksgiving party at Dr. Norman’s house tonight", Imran said firmly and politely.

Syakirah thought to herself, "His mother again...just like the meeting, at his mother's request and look what happened". She paused.

"I'd understand if you say 'no' but it would mean a lot to her if you could come", Imran's voice sounded softer.

Syakirah thought for a while before asking, "And how would I know what happened earlier would not happen again?".

There was silence.

"I give you my word, InshaAllah", Imran replied firmly.

Syakirah thought of Saleha and how much she liked and respected this woman even though she barely knew her. Then she remembered again what she had said to herself earlier, "I'd never set myself for a heartbreak again. God forbid. Ameen".

"Okay but on one condition".

"Name it".

"I don't have to speak to you while we're there".

"Fine. InshaAllah, we'll pick you up at 8.00".

They hung up and Syakirah called Yasmin. "I've just talked to Imran Hakim", Syakirah told Yasmin who responded, "You what?". She explained the whole deal and Yasmin wished her luck.

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They came to fetch Syakirah sharp at 8.00 p.m. After a short greeting to everyone, she got into the car. Syakirah sat at the back with Ani. They avoided talking about what took placed earlier. When they reached Dr. Norman's house, Saleha asked Ani and Syakirah to walk in first. Saleha informed Imran she had told Dr. Norman that Syakirah was his fiance. Imran was speechless and surprised when he heard this. He never thought his mother would go this far. Saleha asked him to act casually if Dr. Norman mentioned this. He wanted to say something but stopped himself considering the people at the party. He didn't tell Saleha the promise he made to Syakirah for coming with them to this party.

Syakirah and Ani met Dr. Norman and his wife. The doctor introduced Syakirah to his wife as Saleha's future daughter-in-law. Syakirah forged a smile when she heard that. After a short chat they found a place to sit.

Ani told Syakirah that Saleha had to tell Imran what she herself had promised not to do.

"So, we're like having a charade tonight", Syakirah said with a forced smile again. Ani understood how she felt but it was only for that night she thought.

The party was small. Some of the people invited were Dr. Norman's patients. Saleha was glad to have the opportunity having the company of Syakirah. Dr. Norman was honest in keeping his promise about her real status to him.

Later Saleha and Imran joined them for a while before Dr. Norman's wife came. She wanted Ani to meet her friend. Imran and Syakirah barely spoke to each other but managed to cover it in front of Saleha. In order to keep his promise, Imran excused himself to mingle.

"So, Aunt Saleha, how long have you known Dr. Norman and his wife?", Syakirah asked.

"Ohh, I met them here in KL at a boutique which belongs to Ani's friend. I sometimes come with her when she visits her friends", Saleha replied. She didn't like having to lie to Syakirah but thought that that was how it would be for now. They talked about Ani's business in Johor. While they were talking, Saleha saw Dr. Norman approaching them.

"Enjoying yourselves, ladies?", he said with a smile. "Miss Syakirah, I think you and Mr. Imran would make a beautiful couple. Lucky for Puan Saleha".

Syakirah was not sure what to say. Then she looked at Saleha and said, "InshaAllah. Thank you, Dr. Norman". He asked her about her job and the three of them talked for a while. Saleha was relief in a way but realized Syakirah looked uncomfortable. She gave Syakirah a cue to leave.

"Dr. Norman, I've been meaning to talk to you about something", Saleha said. Syakirah understood her intention and excused herself.

As Syakirah left, Saleha thanked Dr. Norman for keeping her secret. She told him she would let Imran know soon.

Syakirah went to take some more drinks. Suddenly she heard Imran's voice not far from her. She turned, and their eyes met. She casually walked away. Imran excused himself from the people he was talking to and followed Syakirah. He knew he made the promise but thought to try any way to make amend for his bad manner at the coffee- house.

"Syakirah", he called her.

She turned around and responded, "I thought you gave me your words".

"I'm sorry to break it for a while but I believe the hosts know we're engaged …for now, remember?", he said with a sarcastic grin. Imran continued, "I think it would look awkward if we keep avoiding each other. So, why don't we be friends for a while?"

Syakirah felt annoyed by his statement but tried to be reasonable considering the surrounding. She nodded in agreement and said, "I guess it won't hurt to pretend. Let's go back to our table".

"Not so fast. Don't worry, I won't bite you if we stand here for a while", he joked with a grin but Syakirah just smirked. "You're not easy to forgive, aren't you?".

"Keeping your promise will do", she replied.

He grinned and shook his head a little at her words. Then he whispered to himself, "You're a one tough lady, Miss Syakirah".

They walked to their table. Ani and Saleha were talking when they reached the table. Saleha smiled when she saw the two of them.

They left the party at 9.30 telling Dr. Norman they needed a good sleep for the next day driving. Then they drove to Syakirah's place.

"Thank you for the evening", Syakirah said to Saleha.

"You're welcome, dear. I hope we'll meet again...I mean may be the next time when we visit Hidayat", Saleha uttered with a smile.

"Yeah...sure, InshaAllah", was all Syakirah could say. She hoped this was the last time.

"I'm sure Miss Syakirah would be busy" Imran interrupted. Saleha gave him a quick glance and he continued, "It was nice knowing you, Syakirah".

"Same here. Have a safe trip tomorrow, InshaAllah". They said good bye and left.

On the way to the hotel Saleha wanted to ask Imran about Syakirah but decided to wait until they got home the next day. She thought it would give Imran some time to think. After all, she knew Imran would not say anything about it until she had asked him first. The three of them talked about the party instead. When Imran asked Saleha about Dr. Norman, she told him what she had said to Syakirah. Ani went along with her friend.

CHAPTER 14

Syakirah was walking to her office after class when a student stopped to talk to her with a salam.

"Excuse me Miss Syakirah, but do you have a minute?", Hidayat asked.

Returning his salam Syakirah looked at her watch to check the time because she had an appointment with the Head of the language Center at 10.30. Then she replied, "Sure, Hidayat", and they both continued walking. Syakirah told him she needed to go to her office before her appointment.

"I heard from one of the Language Camp committees yesterday that a meeting is set to be on this Friday. So, I was wondering if you could give me some input about it. I'll be in the meeting too so I want to be well prepared", Hidayat explained.

"Yes, two of the committee members came by my office on Monday. The sub-committees finalized the activities. I guessed they got together during the break", Syakirah said with a smile at the thought of the sub-committees' enthusiasm about the Language Camp.

"Do you know what the activities are?", Hidayat asked.

"Yes. But Mrs. Yasmin and I suggested that they reduce the number of activities. They already submitted the list to the Language Center. I heard the Head doesn't have any problem with the activities except there are too many he said. So, I guess we'll hear from the committees this Friday." They had one week left before the two-day camping.

They reached Syakirah's office. Syakirah glanced at Yasmin's office but it didn't look like she was in. Hidayat followed her into her office. Syakirah filled him in with some of the activities. He thanked her and left.

Syakirah thought, "It's hard to believe that they are brothers. One is reasonable...tolerable and the other....". She heard Yasmin's voice outside her office. She grabbed a file on her table and left her office to see Yasmin.

Yasmin saw Syakirah coming. "Syira, I've tried calling you a couple of times from the Language Center. Where were you this morning?", Yasmin asked her.

"I was in class, Min. Where else? Or have you forgotten I have one on Wednesday morning?, Syakirah replied with a small laugh at her friend.

"Yeah but only one period. I called you after 9 a.m."

"Oh...I had it double period. Remember my make-up class. Today was the last one", Syakirah explained.

Yasmin told her that the Student's Affairs Department gave their decision regarding the request to allow outsiders' visit during the camping. They were not very enthusiastic about it but gave permission for only the students' family members. However, they would not encourage it. Syakirah and Yasmin agreed with the decision. The students were told this camping was strictly for the students. So, they did not really expect outsiders to show up unexpectedly.

Syakirah told her about Hidayat and said she had to go for her appointment. As she was leaving Yasmin asked her, "Any news after that night?", referring to Dr. Norman's thanksgiving party. Syakirah had told her on Monday about what had happened during the party.

Syakirah remembered what she said to herself a few minutes ago after Hidayat had left. "Nothing! Which I think is a good sign. Talk to you later!", Syakirah replied cheerfully and left. Yasmin had a puzzled look on her face.

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Saleha recalled her conversation with Imran. He had been avoiding any topics that might relate to the meeting at the coffeehouse and at Dr. Norman's party since the day they got back from KL. Ani had advised her not to push him until he was ready. Saleha had said her time was running out and she needed to know his say. Ani had asked her to give Imran a couple of days before confronting him. The night before, which was two days after their meeting with Syakirah, she had finally brought up the issue. As she had expected, he neither gave an indication that he liked nor disliked Syakirah.

"Mom, remember what I said when I agreed to go through the meeting?", Imran asked his mother politely.

"You didn't promise you'd commit to anything...I remember that", Saleha replied and Imran nodded with a smile. "But Imran....", before she could continue, Imran interrupted her.

"Mom, please ...okay, if you really want my opinion about her...all I can say is...she was okay". He sounded calm and casual.

"Okay? What does that mean?", asked Saleha in a dissatisfactory tone.

"That she was nice and respectful...to you and Aunt Ani. But she was also...", he paused. Then, with a sarcastic grin he added, "kind of over-reacted and gutsy".

"Over-reacted and gutsy? Well, Imran, as I recalled she was being plain honest when you asked her about her job. Then out of no where you ticked her off with your comment...an unpleasant one I should say".

Imran laughed a little and asked jokingly, "Are you defending her, Mom? Wow, that hurts...coz' I'm your son, remember?". He grinned at his mother.

"Well, you know what I meant, Imran".

"I do and I've just given you my honest opinion too. So...I hope we don't have to talk about this again, okay, Mom?", Imran said with a grin. Saleha reluctantly agreed. She remembered Ani had reminded her not to push him.

Saleha's thought was suddenly interrupted when the telephone rang. It was Umar asking for Imran. "He's still upstairs getting ready. Is everything okay, Umar? You don't usually call at this hour", Saleha asked Umar.

"Oh, no...I just want to ask him about something", Umar replied. Saleha asked him about his family. As they were talking, Imran came down the stairs and Saleha gave him the phone.

"Imran, sorry about Monday. I was out of town with some contractors...got back yesterday. Anyway, what about today? Any business lunch?", asked Umar. He had promised to meet Imran for lunch on Monday but had canceled it.

"No, I don't. So, I'll see you at the usual, InshaAllah?", Imran told Umar.

"Great...InshaAllah".

"And Umar....the game this weekend?".

"Sounds good....and Imran, about what you said last time...", Umar recalled when Imran was about to tell him something the day he called to cancel the tennis game.

Imran interrupted him and said, "I'll see you at lunch". Umar understood Imran. He did not want his mother to hear what he had to say. They hung up.

Imran went to the kitchen for breakfast. Saleha was pouring their coffee. Imran noticed his mother seemed as usual. He felt relief. He woke up that morning feeling a little worried about his mother. Letting her down was one of the last things he would ever do. But he had to make his stand clear about Syakirah. He did not want to give false hope to Saleha. He thought the sooner he did it, the better he hoped his mother would let the matchmaking go.

"Mom, about last night...I'm sorry if I've hurt your feeling in any way", Imran began.

Saleha looked at him and said, "It's okay, honey".

"I'm sure, InsyaAllah, when the time is right, neither one of us has to search for whoever my wife will be. It'll just happen, InshaAllah.", Imran continued with a smile.

Saleha smiled back at him and said, "I understand. I also didn't mean to push you into this. I just want you to be happy, In sha Allah".

> "Our Lord! Bestow on us Mercy from Thyself and dispose
> our affair for us in the right way" (Al-Kahf: 10)

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Dato' Anuar called Imran to invite him for a tennis game with him and Melissa that weekend. Imran agreed but informed that Umar would join them too. Later Imran left the office for his lunch with Umar.

They talked for a while about work. Then Imran told him about the meeting with Syakirah. Umar asked him what he actually thought of her.

"You're just like my mother, Umar. Well...to be downright, she's okay....but I don't think I'm...you know. ", Imran said.

"So, you like her...", Umar smiled.

"Like her? Hey, I didn't say that".

"So, why the hesitation?"

"The thought of...you know...", Imran looked at Umar with a grave look and continued. "When someone died, you felt gravely ill...like being knocked by a lorry, but you don't die. The loss took everything there was in you".

"But that was a long time ago. May be it's time to let go", Umar responded.

"What do you mean?", Imran asked squinting his eyebrows.

"Kaira", Umar said with a concerned look on his face. Imran tried to avoid eye contact with his friend. "I mean, close that door and walk away. Then you can enter a new one to spend the rest of your life, In sha Allah".

"You make it sound easy...What are the chances that I won't have to go through it again?……I just want to leave it all to Allah, Umar", Imran said.

"But you won't get a chance at all if you don't take it. It doesn't have to be Syakirah. It could be any one as long as you're willing to take the chance. Take the chance, then leave it to Allah".

"I don't know Umar. May be I'm not game anymore. Any way thanks for the thought and concern. I appreciate them". They both smiled and finished their lunch talking about the game. Umar gave a startled look when he mentioned Melissa and her father would be joining them.

CHAPTER 15

Imran had gone to Penang to negotiate with KS Holding's new potential client. Iskandar drove him to the airport on Tuesday morning. When they left the house that morning, Imran felt glad that Saleha had not brought up the topic about Syakirah for almost a week since their talk that morning. He thought of telling Iskandar but changed his mind assuming it was not a big deal and would soon be forgotten. He did tell Umar about it that weekend when they were at the house before leaving for the court.

"When is he coming back?", Ani asked Saleha.

"Thursday afternoon", Saleha anwered.

"That’s tomorrow?" Ani wanted to confirm it.

Saleha recalled Imran was still in his room when Umar was telling her that Dato' Annuar and Melissa were playing tennis with him and Imran. Saleha had noticed it was the second time Imran and Melissa played the game together. She had brushed off any thought then because she did not want to read too much into what she was witnessing. However, on Monday night Imran had dinner with Melissa and her father.

“Yes”, replied Saleha. She needed to talk to Ani. She had called her friend the day after Imran had left for the airport but Ani had gone to Singapore on business.

"Sal, sorry I wasn't here when you needed someone to talk to", Ani apologized. She could imagine how Saleha was feeling earlier that week after listening to everything her friend had told her.

"You don't have to apologize Ani. You have a business to run. I understand".

"You don't think it was more than a dinner, Sal?", asked Ani when Saleha sounded down.

"Well, not from the impression he gave. He said she won the bet they made when playing tennis. So, it was more like a friend keeping his promise", Saleha explained.

"Then you don't need to worry. He would not lie to you", Ani said.

"I know… may be I'm reading too much into this", she laughed a little.

"Even if he really likes her, I don't see it's wrong. We might think that Syakirah is the one for him but who knows may be Melissa is meant for him".

Saleha did not like what she had just heard. "Ani, you're backing out already?", she asked.

"I don't mean that. I'm with you all the way, as long as you need me. I've promised, remember? But, I also remember you saying your intention was to see him happily married. And if it means with Melissa, then why not? Your wish would still be fulfilled".

Saleha paused before saying anything. She knew her friend was right. "I know that. It's just that deep in my heart I still believe Syakirah is the one for Imran".

"I'm sure you haven't forgotten what happened at Hillview. We tried to bring the two together and the rest was history", Ani pointed out.

"I'm leaving it in Allah's hands...but if I say I want to pursue this matchmaking, would that make me a bad mother, you think?", Saleha asked Ani.

"No, I would say you're such a strong determined mother who is doing everything for her son's happiness even if it means interfering with his life...which I'm sure he would not like", Ani replied. They both laughed. "For now I'd say, let's just see what 's going to happen next. And, Sal… Allah knows the best!".

"I just hope it won't take too long, InshaAllah. My time is running out", Saleha said and they were both aware of that. It was the end of the third week of March. Saleha heard the sound of Iskandar's car.

"Iskandar's here. I'll talk to you soon", Saleha said to Ani and they hung up.

Iskandar arrived with Marina and the twins. They had been stopping by every evening since Imran had been away. Saleha had thought of asking Iskandar for details about Melissa but decided to hold that thought for now. She didn't want him to suspect anything was going on between her, Ani and Imran. They all had dinner together that night. After dinner, they were talking in the living room when Imran called. He informed Saleha that he had to make a stop in KL for some business and might drop by the college to see Hidayat. He'd be back by Saturday instead.

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Two buses carrying the campers left the college at 3.00 p.m. on Friday. Six language lecturers were in charged. They drove in cars. Yasmin and Syakirah shared a car with Mei Lin. They reached the camping site at 4 a.m. The remote recreation park was beautiful. The woods, which surrounded the area, were not so thick. There was a small waterfall with the water cascading into a pool. The river was clean and the air was fresh. Besides the nature, there were an empty canteen and a few gazebos. Later, the cooking committee transferred all the food and cooking utensils they had brought to the canteen.

Syakirah and Yasmin set up their tent as the students did the same with theirs. After that the students had a congregational prayer followed by a short briefing. The first activity started at 5.00 p.m. It was a sports activity. When they finished it was dark. At 7.30 p.m. they performed Maghrib prayer congregationally and then had dinner. The students later gathered for a campfire. They were divided into smaller groups for three activities - storytelling, poem reading and charade. Syakirah and Yasmin were in a same group with 15 students. Hidayat walked around the campfire catching up with the activities in all groups. He had with him a note-pad and seemed to jot down things to be reported in the Daily Pine the coming week.

It was around 9.30 p.m. when Hidayat stopped by Syakirah and Yasmin's group. He was invited to take part and agreed to participate in charade. As they were all absorbed in the activities, they were disturbed by a noise of a car entering the camping area. Mr. Aziz went to see whom it was. Later, Syakirah and Yasmin were surprised to see Imran walking with Mr. Aziz. The two women continued with the students' activities. Hidayat left the group to meet his brother.

"What are you doing here? Checking up on me?", Hidayat asked with a tease. They both laughed.

"Hey, can't say I can't! But no I'm not. Why? Do you want me to leave?", Imran replied, pretending to look hurt. Hidayat punched him on the arm.

"Only if you tell me why you're here...", Hidayat said with a grin.

"Hey, I rented a car and drove up here and all I got are questions from my brother? Give me some credit for the effort!", Imran explained.

Hidayat looked at his brother with a grin and Imran continued, "I've been in Penang since Tuesday. I was supposed to be back yesterday but something came up and I had to stay longer. Then I went to KL to run some errands. I got in KL this morning. I thought of meeting you at the college after Jumaat prayer but when I called they said you had already left".

"I did tell you about this camping", Hidayat said.

"Yeah, but I thought you were leaving tomorrow morning. It must have slipped my mind. Any way, I'm here now!", Imran explained.

"So, you drove up here just to meet me? I thought you're a busy businessman", Hidayat said teasing his brother.

"I am but never too busy for my brother. Remember, we still have Iskandar taking care of things, right!", Imran said with a grin.

"So, how's Mom?", Hidayat asked.

"Mom's fine. I told her I was coming to visit you. I didn't expect I'd meet you here". Imran grinned again flashing his dimples.

"You shouldn't have driven up here. But I'm glad you did, though", Hidayat told Imran.

"Well, I was going to leave you a message at first and stay at the hotel. But then the thought of joining you at this campfire sounds exciting...my flight was supposed to be at 8.30 a.m. but I'm taking the 11.30 a.m. instead. I'd rather be sleeping in a tent with you than be all by myself in the hotel room...that is if there is room for me", Imran smiled with a questioning look.

"I'm afraid no....", Hidayat told Imran. As Imran raised his eyebrows, Hidayat continued, "...just kidding, bro. So, let's go! We've about 15 minutes left before the late supper". Hidayat glanced at his watch. It was almost 10 p.m. The two brothers approached the nearest campfire, Yasmin and Syakirah's. They sat near the group but did not exactly join them. Syakirah glanced at Imran who happened to look at her as well. He smiled politely at her and she returned it with a nod.

The last activity finished at 10.20 p.m. and the students went to the canteen to have some light supper before going to their tents. Hidayat and Imran walked to Syakirah and Yasmin. Hidayat introduced his brother to the two lecturers. Imran acted as if they had never met before. Syakirah and Yasmin played along but Yasmin could detect Syakirah's restrained greeting. They talked a little about the camping. Then Hidayat left them to join some of the students.

"Thank you...", Imran said as they were walking to the canteen. "...I mean for not letting him know we've met before. My mother would've appreciated that".

"Well, I was surprised for a while but thought may be it was some kind of a deal between the two of you", Yasmin responded looking at both Imran and Syakirah.

Syakirah responded, "No Yasmin, there wasn't any, but I could tell why Mr. Imran here...", looking at Imran and continued, "...would want to do that". She remembered his promise before they went to Dr. Norman's party more than a week ago.

"Please call me Imran", he smiled at both women. They reached the canteen. Imran excused himself to meet Mr. Aziz who had welcomed him earlier. Syakirah and Yasmin took their drinks and joined the other lecturers.

By 11.15 p.m. all students left the canteen except a few who were in the cooking committee. Hidayat was talking to these students when Imran approached him. He told Hidayat he was going to his car to take some stuff before going to their tent. Syakirah and Yasmin were talking with some lecturers about the next day's activities.

"So, that's about it. Hope the treasure hunt will go well", Mr. Aziz said. They all agreed with him. Slowly the lecturers started to leave the canteen. Syakirah glanced at Hidayat and saw Imran walking towards his brother. Then the two brothers left for their tents after saying good night to the lecturers. Yasmin and Syakirah helped the cooking committee clear the tables before retiring to their tent.

“You think it has anything to do with the meeting at Hillview?”, asked Yasmin while they were walking to the tent.

“I don’t know, Min. Hope not. I had enough encounters with him. At least I had aunt Ani and his mother at that time”, replied Syakirah.

“You really don’t like him that much?’, questioned Yamin.

“He just distubs me so much. That’s all. Let’s forget about this. He’ll be gone by tomorrow, In sha Allah”, responded Syakirah with assurance.

“Don’t be too sure you won’t see him again”, teased Yasmin.

Syakirah shrugged her shoulders. But, she had a weird feeling that what her friend had just said would be true. She pushed the thought away. She prayed in heart, that Allah would save her from having to deal with Imran again.

****

The next morning the treasure hunt started at 8.00 a.m. Hidayat went with one of the groups to get a close insight for his article. Imran waited at the canteen with the lecturers. He joined Mr. Aziz, Yasmin and two other male lecturers. The lecturers were discussing about the next activity - Win, Lose or Draw. Imran learned that Syakirah and Mei Lin would be supervising together.

Syakirah and Mei Lin were so busy talking to some students that they did not notice Imran was looking at their direction. He wondered what made her agree to the meeting at Hillview. She seemed to mingle comfortably with the students and her colleagues. He could tell Syakirah was not someone who could be talked into something. Neither did she seem like someone traditional who would agree to be

matched made by others. He snapped out of his thought when Syakirah turned her head towards him. She must have felt his stare he thought. He smiled politely at her and she returned it quickly.
Imran looked at his watch. The time was 8.50 a.m. He had told Hidayat he would be leaving at 9.00 a.m. Mr. Azmi noticed him checking the time.

"Hidayat knows you're leaving at 9.00, right?", Mr. Azmi asked.

Imran nodded and said, "I guess he didn't think hunting for the treasure would take this long". They both laughed at Imran's remark.

"Well, it's almost one hour. They all should finish any time now. We didn't cover that much area for this game", explained Mr. Aziz.

"I'll give another 15 minutes. Then I'll have to leave", Imran said.

Five minutes later some of the groups finished the game but the group that Hidayat had joined did not come back yet. Imran checked his watch again and told Mr. Aziz and the lecturers in their group that he had to leave.

"Tell him I'll call him tomorrow, InshaAllah", Imran asked Mr. Aziz who then promised to do so. They all said good bye to him. He asked them to say good bye to Syakirah and Mei Lin as the two lecturers were still talking with the students. Then he went to Hidayat's tent to pick up his stuff.

Syakirah and Mei Lin finished their discussion with the students and joined Mr. Aziz and the group. They were told that Imran had to leave. Syakirah asked about Hidayat and Yasmin told her that Imran had waited long enough.

"Well he won't get to watch the next activity. But then he could get a complete story from his writer brother, I guess", Mei Lin said and smiled.

"Now, that reminds me I need to get the word cards for the game. They're in your car", Syakirah said to Mei Lin.

"Here!", Mei Lin handed her car keys.

As Syakirah was walking to Mei Lin's car, she saw Imran putting his things in his car. He closed the door of the back seat and walked towards Syakirah. They both stopped at Mei Lin's car.

"Syakirah, can I speak to you for a while?", Imran asked.

"I thought you're leaving", she responded casually and continued opening the door of the car. She picked up a box containing the word cards.

"Oh, this won't take long", Imran said.

"Okay", Syakirah replied as she closed the door of the car. Holding the box in her hands, she stood facing Imran.

"I've been meaning to ask you this since...", Imran paused as Syakirah listened carefully. He knew he would be considered rude for asking this question.

"Yes?", Syakirah responded questionably.

"Why did you agree to meet us at Hillview?". There he had said it, Imran thought. He finally asked the question that had been on his mind since the day his mother had told him about the meeting at Hillview. He wasn't sure why he asked her now but he just wanted to know her reason. His face was expressionless as he waited for Syakirah to answer.

Syakirah was a little surprised but she was right she thought. It was exactly like she had imagined. Imran had thought she had agreed to be match made, or at least, to the idea of matchmaking. She paused and appeared relaxed as well. Then she asked Imran back, "Why do you think I did it?".

"I asked you first", Imran replied studying the woman in front of him. She looked very much in control he thought. But again she didn't appear ticked off by his question. This woman was different from the one he met at Hillview.

"It was your mother. I came for your mother. You may think that I don't know her well and you're right. But I do like her and in some way I respect her. She reminds me...", Syakirah paused. She held her thought of comparing his and her mothers. Then she continued, "She's a sweet lady, Imran. I could not refuse when she asked me to the meeting. I thought I'd do her a favor". Syakirah was contemplating on telling him her main reason. The one that she had told Maria right before she agreed to the meeting.

"Well, I'm sure she is a sweet lady. She's my mother." Imran realized he sounded sarcastic now.

Syakirah felt her temper was slowly rising. She told herself she was not going to let his action get to her like last time. She would tell him her other reason. She had nothing to hide from him any way. Taking a deep breath, she spoke.

"I think I could guess what you're thinking, Imran. You're wondering why I would agree to a match making, right?". Imran nodded slightly. "Well, the answer to your question is 'no'. I didn't. Going to the meeting was my way of proving how wrong the whole idea was. I think I did get my answer, didn't I?", Syakirah finally said what she had been contemplating to do.

Syakirah looked straight into his eyes with a sarcastic grin. She had never confronted a man that way before. But she felt relief because now it was all out in the open. At that moment, they both remembered the incident at Hillview. Syakirah noticed Imran didn't look surprised and neither was she as they stood there staring at each other. He seemed composed. Syakirah held her anger.

"I'm sorry if I've offended you", Imran began after a pause between them. He glanced at his watch. It was 9.30 a.m. Then he heard someone calling him. He turned around and saw Hidayat.

Syakirah felt anger, yet she tried not to be furious at him. Part of her was angry at herself for ever letting herself involved in that mess in the first place. Another part of her felt grateful because she finally got the chance to redeem her pride. On top of it all, she remembered this was planned by Allah to happen. But she would never, in a million years, let this man think of her as someone who would let others make decisions for her.

"Well, so am I. Now that we're both clear about it, I think you could leave in peace. Good bye, Mr. Imran. Assalamualaikum", Syakirah said and turned to leave. But Hidayat was already close to where she and Imran were standing.

"Assalamualaikum, Miss Syakirah", Hidayat said.

"Waalaikumusalam, Hidayat. And Imran, have a save flight home, In sha Allah", she smiled at both brothers and left. She was being casual so that Hidayat would not suspect anything and Hidayat didn't seem to.

"Hey, I thought you had left already", Hidayat said.

"I was about", Imran responded and smiled at his brother. His mind was still on what had just happened.

CHAPTER 16

It was almost 2 p.m. when Mei Lin sent Syakirah home after dropping Yasmin first. They were all tired but happy because the Language Camp went smoothly. Despite the incident with Imran, Syakirah did have fun at the Language Camp. After cleaning herself and doing her solat, she sat down with her housemate. Syakirah told her about the camping. Then she decided to go to her room to rest. She picked up *Muslimah* magazine and settled in bed. As she was flipping through the magazine, her talk with Imran came to her mind. "Yasmin was right, I really gave it to him", she slowly said to herself. She had told Yasmin

about the incident and Yasmin was surprised. She had never expected Syakirah would confront Imran like that. Syakirah believed that the whole thing finally ended. She would not have to see him again. Again, Yasmin reminded her not to be so sure. Only Allah knew what was in store for her.

Her life was back to normal thought Syakirah. Her parents and grandmother had asked her only once about Imran after she came back from the semester break. She told them nothing had happened since the first meeting. Everything that happened since then she shared only with Yasmin. Now that she had settled with Imran what she had thought all along, she felt so much better. None of her family would put hope on something she did not want to pursue herself.

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Saleha glanced at the clock. It was almost 4 p.m. Imran was on the phone with Umar. They were going to play tennis after Asr prayer. When Imran came back yesterday, she was surprised but happy when Imran told her he had gone to the Language Camp to see Hidayat. She had asked him if he had met Syakirah there. Imran told her he did but excluded the part about his talk with Syakirah. Saleha called Ani that morning and told her friend about it. Ani reminded her not to get too excited considering Imran had a dinner again with Melissa and her father after coming back from the camping. She told Ani she still remembered their agreement to wait and see what would happen next. However, she could not help feeling happy and putting up hope after Imran had told her about the Language Camp. Saleha was so deep in her thought about her conversation with Ani that she didn't notice Imran joining her for tea.

"Mom...", he called her and Saleha snapped out of her thought. "Daydreaming?", Imran teased her.

Saleha smiled and replied quickly, "About what it would be like to be at the camp".

"Like I said, it was fun. You should have seen Hidayat. He was all excited with what he's going to write this week", Imran said. He could tell his mother had more than just the camp in her mind. She had Syakirah in her thought but Imran didn't want to go into it.

"Umar is picking me up in about half an hour. I'm going to get ready now", Imran told her and finished his tea.

Imran and Umar left for the game at 5.00 p.m. In the car, Imran told him about the camping.

"You should have stayed until today. You could use some relaxation, pal", Umar glanced at Imran with a smile.

"I did relax myself there but I also got more than what I went there for", Imran said and explained to Umar what had happened between him and Syakirah.

"Couldn't say why she shouldn't act the way she did. You asked a foolish question. Even though you were curious, it doesn't mean you should question her like that. I think it was kind of rude, don't you think?"

"I thought it was too", Imran said not looking at Umar. Umar had a puzzled look on his face.

"Why did it bother you so much, any way, that you had to ask her?', Umar asked.

"Well, that was the question I had asked my self before I actually asked her", Imran answered and turned to Umar. "But I guess I didn't get much by asking anyway. In fact I apologized to her because I felt I had offended her". He paused and turned to look straight ahead the road in front of them. "I mean I now know we both detest the idea of matchmaking but I still couldn't answer my own question...you know...making it such a big deal. I could simply let it go just like that. In fact I had already told my Mom it was over after we came back from the meeting with her".

"May be there is something about her that you do like after all", Umar said and glanced at Imran with a teasing smile.

"You tell that to my mother and she would be all excited. But no, I don't think so. I mean she is okay but I don't think I'm interested in that way, you know...".

"Well, okay. No pressure", Umar laughed a little. "Take your time...though I think you've taken too much already. Now, what about this thing with Melissa?", Umar asked with a mischievous smile.

"What do you mean? We're friends. I stopped by the office yesterday and got a message that she had called. I called her back and we went out for dinner last night….together with her parents, mind you", Imran told Umar.

"Hmmm...", Umar grinned while raising his eyebrows. "So, why go out with them so often lately if you're not interested in her?"

"Umar, have you ever heard of a term friendship? We're friends, okay. I do business with her father. And they are good people to be around with… plus I respect him as my father's friend. It's your responsibility in Islam to keep contact with your parents' friends even after they're gone. Or have you forgotten that?".

"The last part I'm well aware. But, she's a friend, huh? That's interesting. This is a progress I think. I mean you... having a real friendship with a female friend. I don't remember this for a long time. Could it be her, then?", Umar continued teasing Imran.

"Let it go Umar! We're friends. We share some common interests. That's all".

"Not like Syakirah where you have to tick her off all the time?"

"All the time? I've only met the woman twice, Umar?"

"And you've seen Melissa more than that. So, there you are! I'm not trying to pick a choice for you, Imran, but I think you could tell yourself from this. You could pursue something with one of these women. Your mother has chosen Syakirah for you but you don't seem to agree. You like Melissa, so your mother may eventually do too if you tell her you like the girl. All in all, it's you who's making the choice".

"For someone who pursues contracts and tenders, are you good at analyzing and giving suggestion about this kind of thing too, huh?", Imran laughed at Umar. "I don't even feel like I'm at the point where I'm making a choice between these two women. As far as I know, I'm not facing with any choices. Syakirah was just like an acquaintance due to my mother and Aunt Ani's work. And Melissa, like I said, is a friend. End of story".

"But not the book?", Umar responded grin.

Imran shook his head lightly.

"It just crossed my mind...", Umar paused with a thoughtful look on his face. "Why did you go to the camp really? Just to meet Hidayat? Or to get the chance of meeting Syakirah? I'm sure you knew she would be there. And if that is true, then why? It can't be just to ask her that question".

"Oh, not this again, Umar. I thought we've finished talking about her. You sound just like my mother now. Meeting Hidayat, of course". Imran paused and continued, "May be...the chance to see and ask her that question too. Something like an unfinished business".

Umar smiled at Imran with a twinkle in his eyes. "What?", Imran asked him.

"Did it finish?", Umar asked smilingly.

"Yeah, I think so", answered Imran short.

"What exactly do you think? You're a businessman Imran. A business is done deal when it's finished. But is it with this one? May be you should ask yourself why you wanted to see her instead of why you asked her that question. Then you'll get the real answer why you ever made yourself ask her that question".

"You're reading too much out of this, Umar".

"Am I? That's you to decide. My feeling is telling me that you wanting to know why she had agreed to the meeting wasn't as much as you wanting to know more about the kind of person she is to agree with the meeting. That's why you went there. You could've called to ask her that, right? Instead you took the opportunity to see her for yourself. Besides getting the answer to your question, you got to see the kind of person she is for yourself. My question now is why would you care to know if you're not interested in her".

Imran shrugged his shoulders. Umar just smiled at him.

"Now that you've seen more of what she's really like, you're still saying she's just okay. Is that true?", Umar asked Imran.

"What do you want me to say?", Imran answered with a question. He didn't want to delve into this issue. It wouldn't make a difference to him which woman Umar was referring to. He started to feel like he might find out something he would not want to face. It would make him look into his feeling. He felt like dishonoring the memory of Kaira.

"Look, Imran. What I see here is you have two nice women. One whom you like and the other whom your Mom thinks is good for you. So, make your move. Who knows may be the time has finally come for you to settle down, my friend!".

They drove in silence for a while. Umar thought he would let Imran digest what he had just said. Then, as they were approaching the Sports Center, he changed the subject. After they both got out from the car, Imran stopped Umar.

"Umar, thanks". He knew his friend cared about him but he still wasn't sure what he needed to do about the whole thing. He decided to let it be as it was for a while. He would follow the flow as it went by.

"Anytime, pal!", Umar responded hoping that Imran would now start to think seriously about what they had talked in the car.

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Imran had lunch with Dato’ Annuar and Melissa after a business meeting during that week. Then, on the weekend Imran and Saleha were invited to Dato' Annuar's house for dinner. Melissa said it was a thanksgiving treat because she completed a project she had been working on. She also owed it to Imran who had helped her with some business matters.

Saleha was waiting for the right time to ask Imran about Melissa when Imran spoke to her first. He knew his mother wanted to talk to him about Melissa especially after the dinner at Dato' Annuar's place. He told Saleha that he and Melissa were just friends. Saleha could tell he was telling the truth. In a way she was glad because her son had not chosen Melissa after all. May be she still had hope for Imran and Syakirah. But that did not make her too happy either. She called Ani and told her friend about it.

"May be I would never get the chance to see him married. He doesn't like Syakirah and he doesn't seem interested in pursuing a relationship with Melissa either", Saleha expressed her worry and disppointment.

"Sal, are you saying that now you wouldn't mind if he chose Melissa?".

"May be...I don't know. What I know is I want to leave this world knowing that he has someone to look after him. And right now it doesn't seem like it's going to happen any time soon".

Ani hated to hear her friend sounded worried and depressed. But she didn't know what to do to help her out. She remembered her coming trip to K.L. May be Saleha would like to go with her. It would take her mind of thinking about Imran’s future for a while. They could visit Hidayat too.

CHAPTER 16

Saleha had agreed to accompany Ani to K.L for a Busana Muslim exhibition on Tuesday. Ani also had some of her routine boutique's errands. They reached K.L at 2 p.m. and checked in at the usual hotel.

They had planned to stay overnight in K.L because Saleha wanted to visit Hidayat the next day. After Ani finished with her errand, they went shopping at the Mall.

Before dinner they both took a taxi to the K.L mosque. Saleha always liked to go there every time they were in K.L. It had a special meaning to her besides being a place to pray. It was the mosque that she and Kamal would go every time they were in K.L. About a year before his death, they had gone for umrah. Since then, Saleha had noticed her late husband had become more religious. She was grateful Allah had shown them the way to Him. His change influenced their family in a good way.

After prayer, Saleha and Ani went out to dinner at their favorite restaurant which served all kinds of traditional dishes. They seldom chose the big restaurants when they ate in K.L except when they were joined by Ani's friends. They were about to leave when Ani talked to Saleha about Imran.

"You haven't mentioned him at all this time. After all we're here...the town where Syakirah lives", Ani said.

Saleha smiled at her best friend. Ani noticed the look on her face when they talked about these two people. Her look expressed her confidence and hope.

"I know but when we were at the mosque I did pray for them...", she answered and continued, "...like always".

"The last time you told me, he was going out with Melissa. Has anything changed since? You still think he and Syakirah would have a chance?", Ani asked. She remembered her friend was still worried with the growing relationship between Imran and Melissa.

"Have I told you that I changed my mind?", she answered with a question and smiled.

"No. But Sal, don't you think may be we should give him and Melissa a chance. I mean what's the point of hoping for him and Syakirah if Imran has already found someone he'd want to be with. And you've never told me he doesn't like her."

"He's never told me he's interested in her either. He said they are friends", Saleha responded confidently and continued. "Ani, I'd know if he really cares about her. I can still remember how he acted when he was in love with Kaira. It's not like that with Melissa. So, in that way I still have hope".

"But what makes you think it won't happen? He sees Melissa more often than Syakirah. I know you'd like to see him with Syakirah but by the look at how things are right now, I would not be surprised if it doesn't happen. What I want is for you to be happy. .. for the time we are left with, In sha Allah. I don't want you to be heartbroken, Sal. And if you continue with this you are setting yourself up for it".

Saleha knew the truth in what Ani had said. She should be hoping and praying for Imran and Melissa. She should be happy that her son had finally seemed to show an interest in his personal future again after such a long time. But deep down in her heart she just didn't feel happy for his choice if Melissa was the one. She believed Syakirah was the right woman for her son. That was what her heart had been telling her, since the first time she met Syakirah.

"I understand Ani. To be honest, part of the reason why I came with you today is to get away from that fact. You know me well. I'd never hide anything from you. I want to be happy for him but I just can't. May be I'm being stubborn but I can't help it", Saleha opened up. Ani could see the change in her friend now. A few minutes ago Saleha was being strong but now Ani could tell her friend was already heartbreaking. She was using her hope and confidence to cover it. She was fighting the thought that her wish and hope were crumbling down.

"I'm sorry for you but fighting it like this is not good for you, Sal", Ani said as she looked at her friend. "You know I'd do anything to help you get your wish…InshaAllah I would… but this one is beyond our reach. It's not something we can get hold of by simply going after it so that it will be ours. Neither it is something that we could force our way to happen. It's a matter of hearts, feelings and commitment. We've done what we could. It's in Allah's hands. Only His willing could bring those two hearts together. If it is to happen, it will, In sha Allah. If not, you've to try to let it go", Ani expressed her sympathy.

> "And moreover He hath put affection between their hearts;
> not if thou hadst spent all that is in the earth couldst thou
> have produced that affection but Allah hath done it; for
> He is Exalted in might Wise" (8:63)

Saleha listened quietly and agreed with her friend with a heavy heart. In some ways she felt she was being selfish. Imran's happiness is her happiness and if he had found it, she should be happy for him. She liked Syakirah a lot. She could not explain to herself why she did. But the fact was it was she, not Imran, who liked Syakirah.

They went back to the hotel. They decided to drop the subject they had discussed before and concentrated on the next day's meeting with Hidayat and the exhibition.

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Saleha woke up at 5.30 a.m. with a throbbing pain in her chest. She called for Ani who was shocked to see her friend looking pale and sweating. Ani helped her take the medicine. Ani asked her to lie down and said she would call Dr. Norman. Saleha stopped her saying that she would be better in half an hour. Saleha explained she sometimes had that attack but it would go away quickly. Ani was still worried. She had thought of calling Imran but decided to wait a little longer. Later, Saleha was fine and Ani was relief.

"Are you sure you're up for the exhibition, Sal? You could stay and get some more rest if you want. You still look a little tired", Ani told Saleha. The opening ceremony of the exhibition started at 10.30 a.m.

"I'm fine now. I just need to lie down for a while and I'll feel better, InshaAllah. It's still early", Saleha responded. She looked at the clock on the drawer beside the bed. It was almost 7.00 a.m.

It was almost 9.45 when they took a cab to the exhibition. Every once in a while Ani glanced at her friend. She wanted to make sure her friend was really fine. She had a feeling that her worry about Imran had something to do with the attack that morning. Ani remembered Saleha seemed quiet after her call to Imran when they returned to the hotel after dinner. Saleha might have gone to bed heartbroken thinking about Imran.

They arrived 20 minutes early but there were many people already at the anteroom of the second floor of the building. They took the seat while waiting for the opening ceremony. While they were talking, Saleha looked uncomfortable and in pain again. Ani looked at her and suggested they go to the hospital. This time she agreed with her friend. Ani called Dr. Norman on her cell phone. They walked out of the building trying not to make a scene and left for the University Hospital. Dr. Norman met them at the emergency lobby.

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Syakirah received the message at 11 a.m. She had just finished her class. The office boy said it was urgent. She left a message to Yasmin asking her to take care of things for her while she was out.

Syakirah ran to the emergency room and spotted Ani. She was nervous by the worried look on the elder lady's face. As Ani saw her, she walked towards Syakirah.

"Thank you for coming on such a short notice. I'm sorry if, I troubled you", Ani began. Syakirah couldn't conceal her panic. Being in the emergency room reminded her the night she brought her neighbor's bleeding son.

"Aunt Ani, what's going on? Why are you here? Who are we waiting for?", Syakirah finally asked.

Ani took Syakirah's hand and walked to the chairs in the emergency room lounge. Syakirah studied the woman's face. She seemed composed though looking worried.

Taking their seats, Ani faced Syakirah and looked straight into her eyes. "She asked me to call you, when I brought her here", Ani began. Then slowly turned her head, Ani looked down at her hands on her lap. Ani knew she had to tell Syakirah everything now. Saleha had chosen Syakirah to know. Her best friend wouldn't have asked her to call this young woman at this time if she had not wanted her to know the truth. She could have asked her to call Imran but she had chosen Syakirah instead. She never thought she would have to do this now. It's only the second week of April. Saleha still have 2 to 3 more months according to Dr. Norman. But Allah knew the best.

"Who? Is it Aunt Saleha?", Syakirah questioned impatiently. Ani nodded. Syakirah was puzzled right at that moment. Suddenly her mind was full of questions and she blurted them out, "But, why...me?...Is she all right? What happened to her? Where's her family? Where's Imran?".

Ani held Syakirah's hand and began telling her about Saleha and why she did not contact Saleha's family. She told Syakirah about Saleha's call the night before and that she thought it could lead to this attack. Syakirah was speechless after listening to Ani's explanation. As Ani finished, they saw Dr. Norman walking towards them.

"How is she doctor?", asked Ani making a gesture to Dr. Norman that it was all right to discuss Saleha in front of Syakirah.

"It's nothing to worry. It's not the cancer. But I'd like to keep her overnight for observation", explained Dr. Norman.

"So, what caused the pain?", Syakirah asked.

"I'm guessing that she has been under pressure or feeling worried lately. Her blood pressure was below normal. But don't worry, it's nothing to do with her heart. Any way I'll keep an eye on her. I'd say she'll be fine tomorrow, In sha Allah", Dr. Norman answered.

Both Ani and Syakirah were relief. They thanked Dr. Norman and Ani asked him to see Saleha. After Dr. Norman had left, Ani invited Syakirah to come with her to see Saleha. Syakirah hesitated at first before agreeing. She felt she was not supposed to be there. She had told herself after the party at Dr. Norman's house that that was the last time she would see Saleha. "Human beings plan but Allah is the best planner of all", these words rang in her thought. If Saleha had trusted her this much to let her know about her health problem, then she should return the trust by showing the woman her gratitude. Even so, she was not sure why she was there in the first place. What she could hope now was that she would not get entangled in the mess again.

They walked into Saleha's room. She smiled when she saw both of them. Saleha apologized for asking Syakirah to come.

"You don't have to apologize. I wanted to come", Syakirah told her.

"I'm sure you're busy, dear. I'll be fine now, InshaAllah", Saleha said. "Ani is here. Doctor Norman said I could go home tomorrow, InshaAllah".

Syakirah smiled politely. "Yes, he told us. Alhamdulillah. I'm glad that you're fine, Aunt Saleha. Is there anything you need...or anything I could do?", Syakirah asked.

"No, thank you, dear. I'm fine. I've been such a fuss. I know you need to get back to the college", Saleha said to Syakirah.

"I'll come again tomorrow, InsyaAllah", Syakirah told Saleha. Saleha thanked her for coming. Syakirah said good bye to the elder women and left. As she was walking to her car she thought to herself. Only two weeks ago she was sure she had ended everything with these people. But now she was again, caught up in the mess she never wanted to be part of in the first place. May be Yasmin was right, after all. She would be meeting Imran again. This last thought made her really uncomfortable. "Ya, Allah, whatever is reserved for me in this whole thing, I pray and seek your guidance", she said in her heart.

"Sal, I told her about you. I told her that you like her very much. And you were worried sick about Imran…that this might have led to the attack.", Ani told her friend who listened attentively.

"And what did she say then?", Saleha asked.

"She did not say much but I'm sure I've made her feel uncomfortable now", answered Ani.

"I never thought it would turn out this way, Ani. But at least now she knew why I insisted on the meetings. I just hope she wouldn't have any hard feelings towards me".

"I hope not. She said she'd come tomorrow, right?", responded Ani.

Saleha nodded and Ani continued, "Why Syira? Why called her, Sal?". Ani looked at her friend questioningly.

"Just in case I have to …say good bye…I want to apologize to her and …", Saleha paused.

"And..?", asked Ani.

"…and see if I could ask her to take care of Imran…", continued Saleha in a whisper. She looked sad but hopeful.

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Syakirah reached her office at 1.30 p.m. She was still thinking about what had just happened when Yasmin dropped by.

"Syira, is everything all right? What was the emergency about?", Yasmin asked as she sat opposite Syakirah who had a puzzled look on her face. Syakirah told Yasmin everything except the fact that Saleha had cancer.

"So, she asked for you? But why? Why you? It's not like she was dying. And where are her children? She could have asked for Hidayat and yet she chose you. She sure really likes you and wishes for you and Imran to be a couple. That much I could tell", Yasmin said with a teasing smile.

"Not gonna happen, okay, Min...In sha Allah. Any way I've promised her that I'd come again tomorrow, In sha Allah".

"Do you want me to come with you, Syira?"

"No. I'll be okay by myself. At least now I know the truth and I'm not going to see them with my eyes closed".

****

Imran was in the study room when Saleha gave him a call. She and Ani would come home the next day instead.

"I was having a meeting when you called. I got worried when the message said you were not coming back today", Imran told his mother.

Saleha had called him earlier, a few hours after Syakirah had left the hospital. She had told Imran's secretary that she would be calling him again at home that night. "Nothing to worry, dear. I hope we have time to see Hidayat tomorrow".

"So, you haven't been to the college, yet?", Imran asked.

"Not yet. May be tomorrow after your Aunt gets everything done. If not, I'd give him a call. He'd be disappointed but he sure will understand, In sha Allah. Any way there's always next time, In sha Allah… when your Aunt has to go to K.L", Saleha explained. Imran didn't seem to suspect anything. They talked a little bit more before saying good night.

After the call, Imran was about to resume his work when a thought crossed his mind. Then he said to himself, "No, can't be". Could his mother be planning to meet Syakirah again? He remembered his mother did not say much when he told her about himself and Melissa. Could his mother be thinking that she could get him to meet Syakirah again since he was not involved with Melissa? With that thought, he opened the drawer and took out Kaira's picture.

"What am I going to do now, Kaira? Everyone is telling me I should move on with my life...and I have. But they said I need to find someone. I already did. It was you. I've moved on with you in my life. They may not see you with me but you were, are and always will be. Isn't that enough already? I don't feel like I'm missing anything as long as I have you", Imran talked to the picture. He still missed her a lot. As he was staring at the picture, he remembered seeing Syakirah for the first time at the Hillview. There was something about Syakirah that irritated him that day as he looked at Kaira's picture. Then slowly he said to himself, "…the white hijab!".

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The next day, Syakirah left the college at 11.15 a.m. She arrived at Saleha's room as Dr. Norman was just leaving. The doctor greeted her and she approached the two ladies.

"Thank you for coming again, Syakirah", Saleha said.

"Don't mention it. Alhamdulillah, I'm glad you're better today", Syakirah told Saleha.

"Yes, Alhamdulillah. She sure is. The doctor said we could leave now. You came just on time. A little later, you would have missed us", Ani joined in.

"Well, I'm glad you've been released", Syakirah said smilingly at both ladies. "I could give you a ride to your hotel...or are you two leaving for Johor now?", Syakirah asked.

"No, we're going back to the hotel first. The flight is at 4.30 p.m.", Saleha explained to Syakirah and thanked her for her offer. At 12.30, they all left the hospital. Syakirah drove them to the hotel. Saleha invited her for lunch at the hotel and Syakirah agreed.

"I guess I can. My class is at 2.00 pm.", Syakirah told them.

As they were eating, Syakirah asked Saleha, "Does Imran know about this emergency stay?".

"No, I called and told him that Ani had some more errands to do and we'd be back later today", Saleha explained. "And Syakirah, about what Ani told you...".

"It's okay", Syakirah interrupted Saleha. "I understand. I hope everything will work out fine with your son, InshaAllah. And, InshaAllah your secret is safe with me". With that she changed the subject.

CHAPTER 17

Imran noticed his mother seemed different after coming back from Kuala Lumpur. He caught her lost in thought several times. Every time he asked, Saleha would dismiss it with believable excuses. Now he was worried. He asked Ani but Ani told him not to worry. She said Saleha must have missed Hidayat. He could tell his mother was not happy about something.

After a few days at home, Saleha was sick again. Imran brought her to the clinic and the doctor said she had a fever. Ani was getting more worried. She was thinking of telling Imran but every time she voiced her suggestion, Saleha asked her to wait. She said not until Imran made up his mind about his future. Ani contacted Syakirah personally.

"Syakirah, I'm sorry to call you about this again. I'm so worried about her."

Syakirah was silent for a while. "I don't know what to say really. I would just tell Imran, if I were you, but then that may not help much either. What she needs is to learn to accept what is happening. I'm sorry to say this, Aunt Ani. I'd do anything to help, In sha Allah. I know she doesn't have much time left. But I don't know how to help."

"I think I have one way to make her happy for her remaining life but I need your help", Ani began.

"Like I said I'd help in any way I could, In sha Allah", Syakirah reassured the elder woman.

"I want to make her dream come true, In sha Allah", Ani said.

Syakirah understood what that meant. She felt like she was put in the spot. If she agreed, it would mean she would be doing something totally against her principle. But then she told herself, she would be doing it for a dying woman whom she had grown to like and care.

"I'm not sure I can do it, Aunt Ani".

"I know and believe me I'm not trying to trick you into anything. If you don't agree, I wouldn't force you. It's all up to you".

"Give me some time to think, In sha Allah".

"Of course, but you know how much time we have".
"I do. Can I discuss this with a friend?"
"You mean Yasmin?"
"Yes,In sha Allah".
"I guess that's fine".
"And what about Imran. Would he agree to this?", Syakirah asked.
"I won't tell him anything until I've heard from you", Ani replied.
"I'll call you soon, Aunt Ani, InshaAllah".

Ani was relief after her conversation with Syakirah. She knew this might not be a good thing to do. But, if it worked out as she had planned, every one involved would be happy in some ways. Saleha would get her wish. Syakirah would help the woman she had grown to like and respect. And Imran would make her mother happy for the last time. Ani decided not to let Imran know Syakirah was in this plan if Syakirah agreed with her plan. This way Imran would think he was the only one pretending. Thus he had to treat Syakirah with less pretense in order to convince Saleha. It would look more real than if both knew each other was pretending. After all, Imran was whom she thought was the hardest to get for her plan to work. Whatever the consequences could be, Ani knew she had to place her trust in Allah to make the plan work.

> "…And whoever puts his trust in Allah, then He will suffice him.
> Verily, Allah will accomplish his purpose. Indeed Allah has set
> a measure for all things" (Al-Talaq: 3)

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Imran had not met or talked to Umar for a couple of days. After sending Saleha home from the clinic, he called Umar from his office. They promised to have lunch together. During lunch he told Umar what he had thought Saleha might have done in K.L. Umar asked him if he had asked her to confirm it. Imran said he didn't because his mother was not feeling well. He also told Umar that Saleha appeared distracted after coming back from K.L. Umar suggested him to talk to Ani.

"You think that's a good idea to do?", Imran asked Umar after listening to his suggestion.

"Well, how else are you going to know? You don't want to ask Iskandar or Hanim to help, do you? That would be the last thing you'd want to do right now. I could help you but it won't be appropriate I think", Umar told him.

Umar had a point Imran thought. "Well, I'll think about it. I don't want my mother to know if I were to see Aunt Ani", Imran said.

"Good. Now, what are you going to say to Aunt Ani if this has to do with you and one of the.... you know who?", Umar asked him.

Imran shrugged his shoulders and Umar told him, "You'd better get ready with some answers, pal!".

Imran thought about Umar's question for a while and responded, "I'll figure it out later, In sha Allah". Then he remembered his other thought a few nights ago in his study room.

"Remember last time you said I should ask myself why I went to the camp?", Imran suddenly asked Umar.

"Yeah...that was what you should've asked yourself instead of asking yourself why you had asked her that question. Why? You've finally found the answer?", Umar asked with a chuckle.

Imran smiled at Umar. Then his expression turned thoughtful and a little serious. "May be...kind of".

"Go on", Umar said.

"Well, I'm not sure why I went there other than to see Hidayat. I wanted to believe that it had nothing to do with her. But as I was looking at Kaira's picture a couple of nights ago, something crossed my mind". Imran paused.

Umar was looking at Imran attentively. By this time they had finished eating and were finishing their drinks.

Imran continued, "See, when I looked at the picture I realized they both wear a white hijab".

"So? It's not like you've never seen a woman wearing a hijab other than Kaira", Umar responded nonchalantly.

"I know. But this is the woman my mother wanted me to meet and hoped for me to pursue a relationship with. That makes her different."

"I still don't get where you're going with this, Imran. You're saying that she reminded you of Kaira and so you told your mother you can't accept her. But Imran, this doesn't explain why you went to see her again?", Umar said.

"May be I should tell you what exactly happened at Hillview because I think seeing her with the hijab kind of triggered this ....whatever I don't know what to call it", Imran told Umar.

"Oh, now you're talking. No wonder there were holes in the story...talk about some missing puzzles, huh...", Umar responded laughingly.

Imran told Umar what went on between him and Syakirah at Hillview and the invitation at Dr. Norman's house.

"Now I get a better picture of Syakirah. She doesn't seem like an easy person to be toyed around. So, why would she agree to meet you guys?", Umar asked Imran.

"See, now you understand why I had to ask her that", Imran answered.

"Okay, may be she had her own reason. But why is that any of your business? As far as I can see, your mission was accomplished. No one is pressuring you into anything with her anymore". Umar had a puzzled look on his face.

"That's right. And she said she did it for my mother though I don't understand why she'd want to do something like that for a woman she hardly knew", Imran said.

"So, there really is nothing else to bother about her, right? Or is there?, Umar asked.

"I don't know. When I first saw her, it was like she immediately annoyed me. May be not herself personally, but somehow…seeing someone who has that similarity to Kaira? Come on, Umar, does my mother really think the only woman I could have a relationship with is someone who identifies with Kaira in some ways?", Imran answered ending with a question.

Umar looked at Imran straight in the eyes while squinting his eyebrows.

"No. So, let's end the discussion about Syakirah, okay?", Umar suggested guessing that his friend still did not have the answer to the question he thought he had the answer to.

Imran nodded in agreement. But Umar had a question in his mind.

"But what if your mother purposely did that? Why is it such a big deal to you?", Umar asked.

"I'd never want to measure another woman to Kaira. Kaira is Kaira. That's why I acted such a way towards Syakirah at that time. It was like I want to make her go away before I started to compare her with Kaira".

"Now you go again about her. If you want to make her go away, then why did you go to the camp to see her? Then, asking her that stupid question to make her angry. You've already accomplished that at Hillview", Umar said.

"I guess so".

"May be... you are now curious about her. I mean may be now you're beginning to see she's not like Kaira".

"So, why would I be curious?".

"Well... you don't think she's right for you because like you said you don't need someone who dresses herself like Kaira in order for you to have a relationship with. Come to think of this, it explains why you're comfortable with Melissa but then that's another story. Now, with Syakirah, you hurt her and you drove her away. Yet you thought you needed to see her at the camp. My question here is, could it be now that you're intrigued by her as herself and not as someone whom you thought identifies with Kaira?", Umar expressed his thought and ended it with a question. He was smiling at Imran now.

Imran looked thoughtful at Umar and responded," I know she's not like Kaira just because she wears a hijab".

"...but you need to see that for yourself", Umar interrupted.

Imran nodded.

"But, Imran, you hurt her again, didn't you? It's clear she 's not like Kaira. And we both know why she agreed to the meeting".

"Yes. So, I have no more questions", Imran responded.

"Except now you feel kind of guilty for hurting her again".

"Yes. But that was the last time. I have no more reason to see her or ask her anything else".

"Are you sure?", Umar asked with a teasing smile.

"I don't know Umar. I guess I am also confused. One day may be, In sha Allah, I'll be able to see this clearly", Imran said.

"Don't forget to tell me when you do, In sha Allah. Now, about you and Melissa. Is it because she doesn't wear a veil like Kaira that could remind you of her?", Umar asked.

Imran paused for a while before slowly nodding his head. "She reminds me of Kaira too sometimes...like when I'm talking to her...or when she makes me laugh. But that was more like remembering Kaira before she had worn the hijab.", Imran explained.

"I see...Kaira wore it when she...", Umar didn't finish his sentence. He, now, recalled the tragic day. Kaira was wearing a white hijab when they went for a picnic on the fateful day.

"Yes. Am I making sense here or what?", Imran asked Umar. He ran his hand through his hair.

"Let me see...", Umar paused. With a thoughtful look he continued. "I think I understand a little bit more here. Melissa brings you the good old days with Kaira and Syakirah does the opposite. How's that?".

"May be".

"But...Imran, it's not a good start for a healthy relationship with Melissa or any woman. Some day you've got to get passed that. May Allah help you, pal!".

"I know… In sha Allah", Imran responded softly.

CHAPTER 18

It had been two days since Ani's phone call. Syakirah had told Yasmin about it. Her friend didn't like the idea. She said Syakirah might be setting herself up for getting hurt again. She reminded her what took place at Hillview and the Language Camp.

"This will involve playing with feelings, Syira. You'll be pretending having a feeling, which does not exist in you. Just look at how annoyed you are by Imran and the way he's been treating you", Yasmin had told her.

"But I can't help feeling sorry for Aunt Saleha. She hasn't done anything to purposely hurt me. Any way, now that I know the kind of person Imran is, I'd know how to deal with him, In sha Allah", Syakirah responded.

"I hope what you know about him is enough to help you go through this if that is what you want to do, Syira. Remember this is like a game of feeling…and the possibility of getting hurt is big…may Allah watch over you", Yasmin warned her. Then, she reminded her friend do Istikharah prayer asking for Allah’s guidance before giving Ani her final decision.

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Ani stared at the telephone on the desk in front of her. Shakirah had called her confirming her agreement to help Ani. Ani was thinking of calling Imran. She recalled her last conversation with Saleha during her last visit.

"Ani, I think I finally have to accept and be grateful with what Allah has blessed me with right now. My children are all healthy and happy. They are all doing fine with their lives. What more do I want, right?", Saleha said to her. Ani could read the disappointment on her friend's face.

"What about your wish for Imran?", she had asked Saleha.

"Well, I made my wish but we know that a wish doesn't always come true. As long as he's happy, Allah will look after him for me. Any way, I have you. You could help me look after him and see that he marries someone he loves, InshaAllah", Saleha answered her question.

Ani was startled when her thought was interrupted by the telephone ring. She was surprised to hear Imran's voice on the other end of the line.

"I'm sorry if caught you at a bad time, Aunt Ani", Imran said.

"Oh no, in fact I was just thinking about giving you a call", Ani responded.

"Oh, really? Well, that's good. Now you can tell me what you have in mind. Lady's first, okay. I just hope it's not another matchmaking plan", Imran told Ani with a small laugh.

"Not exactly but it has to do with it. Don't worry I'm not setting you up with anyone. Even if I would, I would be doing it on my own. Your mother wouldn't be in this again", Ani responded.

"Hmm...this is interesting. Are you saying my mother is not interested in this game anymore?", Imran asked while still laughing.

"A game, Imran? Is that what it was to you?", Ani asked him in reply. Her voice was a little serious. She thought this would be her opportunity to tell him about her plan.

"I don't mean to take light of your and mom's effort. Well, the truth is Aunt Ani, I don't want to hold on to this idea any longer because I don't want to give a false hope to you or my mother. I've told her how I felt. I'm sure you knew it too", Imran explained. He felt bad after calling the women's effort "a game". "And I'm sorry for calling it a game. I didn't mean it that way. I appreciate the love and concern you both feel for me".

"I'm sure you didn't mean it like that. It's just that, the way I see it, your stand about this whole thing is so different from your mother", Ani said.

"I know she did it for me. That's what she told me after I agreed to this idea in the first place. But now we all know it's not going to happen. I don't have to tell her again and again where I stand in this matter. I'm sorry if I've let you down, Aunt Ani", Imran expressed his feeling.

"I'm sure your mother understands that. So, what is it that you're calling me about, Imran?", Ani changed the subject. She thought may be she should wait a little while before telling Imran about her plan.

"Well, I guess we're thinking on the same line. I was wondering if Mom is looking kind of distracted lately because of what had happened in KL recently", Imran began.

"And what exactly would that be, Imran?", Ani asked him with a curious tone.

"Aunt Ani, I'm sorry if this sounds a bit blunt, but did you guys meet Syakirah again?...Or are you two planning to have another meeting for all of us again?", Imran finally asked what he had in mind.

Ani was silent for a few seconds when she heard this. She thought now was the time to explain her plan.

"Imran, you know how much I love your mother and all of you children, right? I would do anything if it would make the whole family happy, In sha Allah", Ani said and paused.

"So, you did see her in KL, then?", Imran asked again.

"Yes, but not for the reason that you think. We did not plan for another meeting. We just met and talked. I guess your mother really likes her but she also respects your decision. As for Syakirah, she likes your mother but like you, she doesn't like to be matchmade. I guess in that way, you two have a similarity", Ani explained.

Imran just listened silently. He thought Ani was going to convince him that he was wrong with his decision. However, he was hearing exactly what he wanted to hear. This woman and his mother now knew that both he and Syakirah did not like to be matchmade. So, finally, the whole things had been laid out in the open and settled. He felt like a pressure had been lifted from his shoulders. He never thought he would feel

this relief. He never even realized this was a pressure to him. May be because he was so afraid of letting his mother down. But at the same time he felt heaviness in his heart knowing that he had disappointed his mother in a way. He knew this was not easy for her. That explained why she seemed sad lately. He guessed the last meeting that his mother and Ani had with Syakirah was a closure to this whole thing.

"Aunt Ani, thank you", Imran finally said.

"For what?".

"For helping her through this. I never meant to disppoint her. As much as she wants to see me happy, I also want the same for her. It means everything to me to see her happy. I guess that was part of my job when I promised to take care of the family when Dad died".

"You're a good son, Imran. But there is something more I need to discuss with you. And like I said, your mother has nothing to do with this though she is the reason why I need your help".

Ani asked to speak with Imran personally. They agreed to have lunch together.

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Imran kept checking the time until it was finally lunch time. He was curious and worried by the sound of Ani's voice. It was serious and urgent. She had never spoken to him that way before. He tried to think of the possibilities of what she was going to tell him but he could not come up with anything. It only made him more worried. He told himself to relax until the meeting with Ani.

Ani was sitting at the table near a corner of the restaurant when Imran showed up. He knew Ani since he was a boy. Only something very critical would make her ask to see him personally. And this had to do with his mother. The thought that something was wrong with Saleha made his heart stop.

"Aunt Saleha, sorry to keep you waiting. I thought I was early but you came earlier. This really makes me nervous", Imran began after taking his seat facing Ani.

Ani could see from Imran's face that he was worried. He had always been good at covering up his real feeling when facing with unexpected news. But this time he failed to do so. With a sad smile Ani responded, "I'm sorry to have caused that but it's time that I do something about this. I'll be breaking my promise but it will be for a good cause".

Imran listened attentively to every word spoken to him. He felt like rushing her to the main point but decided to let the woman in front of him explain everything at her own pace.

"You know that I love your mother like my own sister, right?", Ani asked and Imran nodded in agreement. "Well, what I'm about to do is what any sister would do. Imran, there is something that she has been keeping from you and your brothers and sister". Ani paused as she studied the worried look on the young man who had been like her own son. "Your mother is dying, Imran".

Suddenly Imran felt like his heart had stopped beating and time stood still. His whole world changed in a split second. He could not believe what he was hearing was something that he had feared to happen. He gazed at Ani and wanted to ask Ani for details but he could not speak a word. He felt numbed and speechless. He slowly moved his gaze across the table as if searching for words to speak.

Ani continued, "Imran, I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this. But no one else would if not me. She had asked me not to tell anyone, especially you. She didn't want to worry you".

"What is she...?", Imran couldn not finish his question after he finally got the words out.

"Cervical cancer", Ani replied shortly. She could see Imran's eyes were welling up with tears.

For the next 10 minutes they didn't say a word. Ani understood Imran very well. He would always close himself off in this kind of situation. She had seen him like this when Kaira and Kamal died. The waiter brought them drinks, which Ani had ordered for both of them. Both decided not to eat lunch. Ani just watched Imran.

Finally, Imran asked, "What can I do, Aunt Ani?".

"Make her happy for the time we have with her, In sha Allah".

"How long?".

"Three months, InsyaAllah".

Imran bent his head as he ran his fingers through his hair. He closed his eyes. Part of him was screaming inside for not learning about this sooner. But another part told him the same reason that Ani had

told him a few minutes ago. His mother cared about him too much to worry him about it. Then as he felt the tears spilling out he quickly wiped them off. He took a deep breath and held his face up. The thought of Ani seeing him like that did not embarrass him. He only knew that he had to be stronger from then on.

Ani told Imran of his plan excluding the fact that Shakirah knew the truth about Saleha. He looked hesitant and uncomfortable with the plan. He recalled very incident since the matchmaking had started. He felt bad in some ways about taking the whole thing light when it mattered so much to his mother. His eyes were glistened with tears as he felt touched by the thought. Now, he wondered how to make Saleha believe that he wanted to marry someone whom he had convinced his mother that he did not have feelings for. There was a long pause before he finally spoke.

"I'm not sure if I could do this... but I want to do it for her, In sha Allah", Imran said with a heavy heart.

It was not just the thought of losing Saleha that made his heart so heavy. It was the thought of failing to fulfill his responsibility as a son and attending to his mother’s needs that gripped his heart.

> “And We have enjoined upon men concerning his parents. His mother beareth him in weakness upon weakness, and his weaning is two years. Give thanks unto Me and unto thy parents. Unto Me is the journey” (Luqman: 14)

"In sha Allah. And I'm sure you would make her very happy, Imran. InshaAllah you will", Ani responded.

Ani told him they would meet Syakirah at Hillview the coming week. It would be a trip to KL to visit Hidayat but end with a meeting with Syakirah. After their talk at the restaurant, Ani had Imran agree to let her talk to his mother. At first Imran was reluctant to agree to pretend not knowing about his mother's condition. He wanted to be honest with his mother and asked Ani to proceed with the plan with his mother knowing that he knew the truth. Ani asked him what would Saleha feel if he suddenly agreed to marry Shakirah. He said it would make Saleha feel as if she had pressured him into the marriage. With that in mind, he said he would go along with Ani's plan. Ani promised to talk to him after talking to his mother.

CHAPTER 19

Shakirah was not home when Ani called her on Sunday, a day after her talk with Imran. Shakirah had gone out with Yasmin. When she got home her housemate told her about the call. Yasmin who had stopped by to pick up some books was there.

"Why do you think she called?", Yasmin asked.

"I don't know but I have a feeling I'm about to make my life complicated ", Shakirah answered.

"It's still not too late to back out, right?", Yasmin asked again.

"I already gave my words".

"She'd understand, Syira".

"No. I've made my promise and I'm going to keep it. And it's not just a matter of keeping a promise, Min. I want to do this. And I’ve been doing Istikharah prayer since. Though the plan scares me a little, I feel at peace with the decision I’m making". She remembered her mother who wanted so much to see her get married but never did. She could help avoid, if Alah willing, the same thing from happening to Saleha. She put her trust in Allah for the good intention she felt within her.

> “And put thy trust in Allah and enough isAllah as a Disposer of affairs” (Al-Ahzab: 3)

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Syakirah had just finished her Isya' prayer when Ani called her. Ani told her about Imran's agreement. Now, she just needed to talk to Saleha.

"Aunt Ani, we all know that Imran and I are against arranged marriage. Do you think she would believe if we both suddenly change our minds?", Shakirah asked.

"InsyaAllah. But the next part will involve you", Ani answered. Then she told Shakirah that she and Saleha were coming to K.L on Tuesday. She was going to tell Saleha to take another chance at the matchmaking. Since the three of them knew about Saleha, Shakirah would have to make Saleha believe that her agreement was not pressured. "Can you do this, Syira?", Ani asked.

Agreeing to the question would mean she had to act in another meeting with the man she had been having problem dealing with. Shakirah felt her blood rushing to her face in a flash. She knew what ever that was going to happen would be her decision.

"Syira, are you there?", Ani asked after a long paused from Shakirah. "Are you okay, Syira?".

"Yes..", shereplied short. In her mind there was herself who wanted to help a woman who was dying but there was also a man who she could not tolerate with.

"Syira, like I said, as much as I need you in this, I don't want to force you into it if you don't want to", Ani said wanting to reconfirm and to see that Syakirah was truly sure of her decision.

"I do want to help her. So, yes, In sya Allah, I will do my best to be believable, Aunt Ani", responded Syakirah. In her heart she was repeating the du'a taught by the Imam at the mosque nearby her house.

> "…And whoever puts his trust in Allah, then He will suffice him.
> Verily, Allah will accomplish his purpose. Indeed Allah has set
> a measure for all things" (Al-Talaq: 3)

****

On Monday at 9.30 a.m., Ani dropped by to visit Saleha on her way to the boutique. She had called Saleha before coming and said she wanted to talk to her about Imran and Shakirah. Saleha was surprised at first because she had decided to try to let things go regarding this issue. However, she was a little excited at the thought of what might happen.

Ani noticed Saleha seemed more cheerful than the last couple of days. This somehow made Ani a little uncomfortable. She felt guilty for breaking her promise to her dear friend. At the same time she knew she had to do what she thought was the best for Saleha. Even though Ani had much confidence that her plan would work, she could not
help the fear that it might not go as planned. She was praying that Allah would help it go smoothly

"So, what is this about them, Ani?", Saleha asked after Ani sat on the couch in the living room.

Imran had left for office at 8.00 a.m. as usual. Ani had told Saleha that she wanted to see her alone. Looking at her friend, Ani casually told her that she was going to K.L the next day and would like Saleha to accompany her. Then she told Saleha about meeting Syakirah.

"Why so suddenly? I was just thinking to back off…", Saleha asked again with a curious smile.

"Well, I think we should give one last try at this. I'm going to call Syakirah and set a meeting with her tomorrow. And you could try to talk to Imran about your wish for him and Syakirah...tonight maybe...", Ani told Saleha. She looked straight into her friend's eyes as she was saying all these. She could tell that Saleha was a little surprised at what she was hearing.

Saleha was not sure what to say. They had been through this before. Would it make a difference this time?

"Ani, what are you saying here? Didn't you say I should stop putting hope for them? I thought I was doing fine with that. Not that I like it but it's better than setting myself for disappoitment", Saleha said with a puzzled look.

"Yes. I understand you want to accept things as they are right now. But it breaks my heart to see you look unhappy”.

Silence. They looked at each other.

Ani smiled to give hope and continued,”I don't think it would do any harm if we take another shot at this. I'm not saying that we are going to ignore about their feelings. I know how they both feel about matchmaking but what we don't know is how they actually feel for each other after what has happened so far". Ani tried to give a sensible reason.

"Nothing much has happened so far. They've met twice and nothing seems to click for them. Ani, I'm still not sure about this. I would be very happy if this works but I have doubts", Saleha responded.

"I do too but we wouldn't know until we've tried", Ani said.

"I really don't want to make Imran feel like his mother is forcing him to get married. He has already told me how he felt about syakirah before", Saleha told Ani.

"I know. You told me that already. But what I'm saying here is, we ask him again. I know this is uncalled for but what ever he'd say we'll just take his words. This will be the last time we'd ask him...may be ever, In sha Allah", Ani said.

Saleha seemed thoughtful as she paused before giving her response to what Ani had said. Then, taking a deep breath, she spoke. "I guess I could do that, In sha Allah. I could ask him again, In sha Allah, but the thought of him giving the same answer seems...", Saleha couldn't finish her sentence as Ani interrupted her.

"In sha Allah...try not think about that until you hear what he has to say. Just tell him honestly how you feel", Ani said.

****

Ani had asked Imran not to tell anyone but he insisted telling his best friend. Umar was shocked because this meant his friend would be playing with someone's feeling.

"I did think about that. In fact, I still feel selfish to do this just for the sake of making my mother happy. I might hurt the feeling of someone innocent in the process. It's a sin…", Imran responded in a low voice when Umar pointed the issue.

"But you have decided to do it still?, Umar asked.

"It's the least I could do for her. I know it won't be a real thing but at least she'd be happy in her last days, In sha Allah", Imran told Umar. His eyes were glistened with tears.

Umar sympathized with his friend. He knew Imran was not the kind of person who would take advantage of others to get what he wanted. Syakirah would be hurt, he thought, if she found out Imran didn't really plan to marry her. The least he could do was to suggest something to his friend.

"I know you care about not hurting anybody's feeling on your account. But, she would be unless you do something about it".

"Are you suggesting we let her know?"

"Yes. I'd say, tell her the truth before the proposal is done. Hopefully she would accept the marriage proposal on your mother’s account", Umar voiced his suggestion.

"May be you're right. It didn't cross my mind to do that. I was too caught up in making the plan works, I guess", explained Imran. Umar could tell Imran seemed mentally exhausted.

"Are you going to tell Aunt Ani about this change in the plan?", Umar queried.

"I think I'll handle this one by myself, InshaAllah", answered Imran.

"InshaAllah. I'm not sure how else to help but if there's anything you need just say it. I'd make sure you have it, InshaAllah", continues Umar in a concerned voice. He could deeply feel the sadness that Imran was going through. But at the same time he was not sure what to offer except his moral support and prayer. He had grown to love and respect this man like his own brother but nothing seemed appropriate to do when facing a coming death of someone so dear to you.

"Pray for me Umar…pray for me to have strong faith to face all these…", Imran asked his friend and Umar nodded with a reply.

"In sha Allah, I will".

Silence.

"So, when is the meeting?", Umar broke the silence.

"Tomorrow. I'll drive them to KL to visit Hidayat. Then we will go to Hillview Hotel, InshaAllah", Imran explained.

Umar recalled what Imran had told him before about his first meeting with Syakirah. This made him smiled to himself. He wondered how the second meeting was supposed to be different considering the circumstances.

"I know this won't be easy on you. On one hand, you have your mother. On the other is your past with Kaira. This may be a "charade", but to make it real and believing, somehow it will involve feeling, Imran".

"What are you saying here?", asked Imran with a questioning look.

"Don't be mad at me, ok. You know I've always want to see you happy after Kaira. I've never met this person Syakirah but you have. So far there hasn't been any thing bad I heard about her from you. And your mother seems to like her so much."

"What are you trying to say here, Umar?"

"Just a hope…that you'd finally close that chapter of your life with Kaira. You know I did like Kaira but she's dead and you're alive…much much alive. Life goes on…InshaAllah. And Allah knows the best. What is about to take place is not something you plan, yet it's going to happen. May be it's the beginning of something beautiful though it seems unreal as a start. That's all".

Imran sat silently infront of his best friend. He didn't want to deny what Umar had said. Never in his life had he imagined that he would "play" getting married to someone. But, Allah set everything and human beings just complied with His plans.

Umar was looking at Imran when suddenly the thought of Melissa came across his mind. He was contemplating whether to bring it up then or later. He was afraid in the situation Imran was, he might not realize how this whole thing would affect his budding relationship with Melissa. At least that was what Umar assumed his friend was having with Melissa. Umar wanted to make things easier before things got complicated if it was true that Imran did have a relationship with Dato' Annuar's daughter.

"Imran, there's something else we need to talk", Umar began.

“What is it?”,asked Imran casually.

Umar felt bad to bring up the issue but he believed he was just trying to help his best friend.

"Imran, I know this might not be the right time to ask but I figure no other time is right since what is about to take place might somehow affect this person too…I mean Melissa", Umar finally said it. He tried to read Imran's reaction but failed. He waited for his response.

"Melissa?…We're friends, Umar. She's a nice person and we get along well. And you know I respect her father. He's an old friend of my father", Imran responded casually as if there was nothing serious between him and Melissa.

"So, there's nothing serious between the two of you?", Umar voiced out his guess.

Imran closed his eyes while shaking his head slowly. "Before my dad passed away…or may be I should say before I married Kaira, I remember my father used to mention…well he used to tease me…wanting us…me and Melissa…you know…she was very young then…", Imran told with a slight smile.

"And?", Umar asked.

"Nothing happened. After I married Kaira…and after I…lost her…I never really cared about it. My dad understood me. So, we just didn't talk about it. Until these past couple of months I 've been seeing a lot of her. But mainly for business…and just for friendship sake".

"Nothing serious then", added Umar.

"It was just a two-old-friend kind of thing. He was really closed with Dato' Annuar".

Umar let go a sigh. He felt relief hearing this. All his worry about Imran and Melissa was nothing.

"I'm glad to hear this", Umar said.

"Why?", Imran asked with a puzzled look.

"Just in case…", Umar paused and Imran cut in.

"…in case what?", Imran questioned.

Umar smiled to himself, which made Imran curious. He knew Imran wouldn't take seriously what he was about to say.

"Just in case what?", Imran repeated his question.

"You and Syakirah…", he intentionally stopped and hoped that Imran would guess his thought. And he could read Imran understood what he meant.

"I'm tired of talking about this. I'll just leave it all to Allah…aren't we supposed to leave our destiny in His hands anyway?", Imran responded. He sounded defeated to Umar's thought. For all he cared, he didn't have intimate feeling for neither Melissa nor Syakirah. He just wanted to hold on to the memory of his late wife forever. But at the same time he knew he could not surpass Allah's planning.

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Imran came home at 5.30 p.m. and met his mother watering her orchids. His heart felt heavy at the thought of losing another parent soon. He braved himself and walked to her.

"Seeing you doing this reminds me of Hidayat, Mom", Imran began to help bring about the topic on visiting Hidayat on the next day. Ani had told him that his mother was happy when she suggested the excuse to go to KL was to visit Hidayat.

"Yes. These few days I really miss him, Imran. May be we could visit him soon, InshaAllah".

"I like that thought. Maybe tomorrow we could drop by the college, In sha Allah. I have to do some business in KL. I could drop you at the college during my meeting."

"In sha Allah. But this won't trouble you, Imran?", asked Saleha.

"Of course not Mom. You could ask Aunt Ani to accompany you", replied Imran with a smile.

Saleha's face lightened up at the mention of Ani's name. Now was the time she thought to ask Imran to agree for the meeting. She walked towards the bench near the flowers. Imran followed. After both were seated, Saleha began.

"Imran, there's something else I want to do tomorrow, In sha Allah".

"Yes?", asked Imran as he was trying to be as casual as possible knowing what Saleha was about to say.

"I'd like us to meet Syakirah one more time. I know how you feel about her. But, who knows may be this time, you both could find a way to get along. In sha Allah."

"Mom…I don't know", Imran pretended to be reluctant to agree.

"I promise you won't have to see her again after tomorrow. I'm sorry if my asking this is too much. It's just that since we both don't know what the future holds, let Allah decide all."

With a smile, Imran responded. "Okay,Mom…no more meetings after this. Promise?"

"Yes, I promise, InshaAllah".

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As scheduled they left JB early and reached KL at almost 12 noon. After checking in at Hillview Hotel. Imran was in his room when Ani called Syakirah.

"We just got here about an hour ago."

"Alhamdulillah. Aunt Ani, Yasmin is coming with me", Syakirah informed Ani.

"Whatever is comfortable with you Syira. I'm grateful enough for your agreement to be with me on this. All she knows is that you will come as a request from us."

"I remember that, In sha Allah".

"Imran will drop us at the college at 2 p.m before his meeting. He said he'd pick us up at around 3.30 p.m", Ani told Syakirah.

" Hidayat would be happy to see his mother", commented Syakirah.

"I'm sure he will, In sha Allah", Ani responded and continued." After that we'll excuse ourselves to go to my boutique", explained Ani.

"Aunt Ani, he still doesn't know I knew the truth, right?", Syakirah wanted to confirm about Imran as she was told before.

"No. He thought he was the only one knew. Knowing him, I know he would feel bad pretending to be interested in you. But I leave that to Allah."

"I know. I'll do that too, In sha Allah".

"In sha Allah".

"Okay. I'll meet you at 5 p.m as planned. In sha Allah", told Syakirah.

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They went to the college to meet Hidayat. He was surprised to receive the visit but Saleha explained Imran happened to have a business meeting in KL. He had classes but spared time to have drinks and talk with the two ladies. Imran came to pick them up and had the chance to talk to his brother. Then, they left telling Hidayat that Ani wanted to stop by her boutique before going back to JB.

At 5 p.m the three of them were waiting when Syakirah and Yasmin came. Imran was polite to receive the young women, which made Saleha happy. They talked casually about work.

"Thank you for having me at the language camp", Imran spoke to both Yasmin and Syakirah.

"No problem. You were lucky because that was the first time the college allowed family or relatives to visit during the camping", responded Syakirah. Yasmin made a gesture in agreement to what her friend had said.

"So, may be I could join the language camp again next time", Imran said jokingly with a smile showing his dimples.

"InshaAllah…make it strictly emergency. We don't want it to be a family camping instead ", said Yasmin with a laugh. The others joined her.

"All these time I've never really asked about the business you do, Imran", Syakirah change the topic.

"I didn't think language teachers would be interested in business", Imran responded in a friendly voice.

"Well, for your information we do teach English for business students at the college", responded Syakirah with a smile.

"Yes. May be one of these days we could invite you to give a talk to our students", chipped in Yasmin. They all laughed.

"I may not know about teaching but that sounds good", Ani added and Saleha voiced her agreement.

"Well, to answer your question, Syakirah, we produce and supply home and office furniture", Imran went back to Syakirah's query. He was kind of surprised to see how agreeable the woman was. She was so different from their last two encounters. Imran wondered what changed her but just let go of the thought since he noticed his mother was enjoying herself in the conversation.

Yasmin was impressed to hear the kind of business Imran was in. "A good business I would say, Mr. Imran. Not many Malays succeed in this business".

"It's a family business I guess from the company's name, KS Holdings", Syakirah added.

"Yes, Kamal and Sons. But, my Mom here and my late father were the founders of KS Holdings", Imran smiled proudly with a glance to Saleha.

"Aunt Saleha?", Yasmin said with a surprised look.

"Well, dear, I didn't do much…just lending my ideas. All the hard work was done by Imran's father", Saleha responded in a humble manner. Imran responded with a smile while lighly shaking his head.

"You're being modest, Mom", he said. Saleha told them briefly about the start of the family business and Imran chipped in a little.

The conversation continued and everyone was at ease with each other. Saleha looked beaming with happiness. Syakirah and Imran learned about each other's education background and work experience. Later, at aboout 6 p.m, Syakirah and Yasmin excused themselves to go home. Saleha thought of inviting the young women to have dinner with them but decided to leave the thought aside. She didn't want to ask for too much from Imran. But, to her surprise, Imran made the invitation.

"Would you ladies care to join us for dinner tonight? We know this special place. They serve all traditional cuisines", Imran invited Syakirah and Yasmin politely. Saleha and Ani smiled at the younger women waiting for their answers.

Yasmin responded first, "I can't. I've already made plans with the kids. Thank you anyway, Mr Imran".

"Next time may be, In sha Allah.", Imran said and turned to look at Syakirah. "What about Miss Syakirah?"

"Syira?", asked Ani while Saleha was looking at her anxiously.

"I…I don't know…", Syakirah hesitated. She noticed Saleha seemed hoping to hear her acceptance. She continued, "Well…I guess I could come and join you all,
In sha Allah. After all, it's not always I got the opportunity to dine with a businessman and a businesswoman". She smiled and so did everyone. She glanced at Imran who seemed to nod in agreement.

Imran promised to pick her up at 8.00 p.m. Shortly after, Yasmin and Syakirah left. Saleha turned to Imran and said, "Thank you, Imran".

"For behaving myself, Mom", he teased her.

"That and for inviting her".

"Well, that's my treat. You did say this might be the last meeting we have with her. So, I want to make it special for you", Imran said politely. He knew it wasn't something that Saleha wanted to hear. But he had to be believable. He couldn't show a complete change of opinion for she might suspect something.

"Yes. But we can't take that as definite. All is in Allah's hands, dear", Saleha continued in a cheerful spirit. Imran felt happy looking at his mother. He wished the happiness shown in his mother's face would last forever.

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Imran came with Ani and Saleha to fetch Syakirah. The four of them had a good time enjoying the dinner. They were almost done when Ani noticed Saleha was looking pale.

"Sal, you're feeling okay?", Ani asked. Imran and Sykirah had a worried look on their faces but tried to control it for they didn't want Saleha to suspect anything.

"We've had a long day today, Mom", Imran said.

"I'm fine", Saleha responded politely but she seemed suddenly weak.

"You need to rest, Aunt Saleha. I really enjoyed the dinner, thank you. But, I think we should all go now?", Syakirah told Saleha as politely as possible in order to cover the worry she was feeling inside.

"I agree with Syakirah", Imran said.

"I'm just a little tired, that's all. Don't worry. I don't want to spoil this", Saleha responded.

"You're not, Aunt Saleha. I did have a good time with you all tonight", Syakirah didn't want Saleha to feel bad.

"I think we all did have a good time tonight", Ani agreed.

"And it's almost 9.45 p.m. Tomorrow we have a long trip to take. So, Syakirah's right, we should call it quits for tonight", Imran told his mother and smiled casually at Syakirah. Saleha agreed and they left the restaurant.

Imran was worried all the way in the car when sending Syakirah home. He wanted to do more to attend to Saleha's sickness but tried not to make it obvious that he knew more. Saleha took her medication and rested. Later, when Saleha was asleep, Ani told Imran that the "attack" was something Saleha had from time to time. Imran said he felt like telling all to his mother but Ani advised him to carry on with the plan. She thanked Imran for making the plan worked until then. With Allah willing, Saleha would see what she had wished for. This was what they both had thought.

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The three of them left KL at 10 a.m. Syakirah called Ani to ask about Saleha. She felt relief to hear the woman was fine and wished them a safe trip home. Syakirah promised to talk to Saleha again, when the family had reached home.

It was noon when they arrived home. After prayer and lunch, Imran left for office while Saleha continued resting. Imran was worried and could not concetrate much on his work. He wanted to stay at

home but was careful that Saleh might suspect he knew the truth of her condition. He came home early than usual and explained to his mother that he felt tired after the trip. He hated to lie to her but he wanted to be close to check on Saleha.

Syakirah called as promised and Imran received her call. "Assalamualaikum", Syakirah greeted.

"Waalaikumussalam", Imran returned her salam. He asked who she was. Then Imran apologized for not recognizing her voice.

"That's okay. How's Aunt Saleha doing?"

"Alhamdulillah. She's fine. D'you want to talk to her?"

"Yes, In sha Allah, if she's up".

Syakirah talked to Saleha. Imran watched his mother sounded cheerful talking to Syakirah. He himself felt surprisingly comfortable talking to her. No more anger or distraction liked before. He figured that might be because he wanted so much to make peace with her for his mother's sake.

After the talk, Saleha told Imran that Syakirah was nice to care about her. Imran just smiled at her. He didn't think that he would like this person after what had happened two months ago. But noticing how much she really cared for his mother made him see she was truly honest when she told him that she liked and respect his mother. Somehow this fact brought peace to him. Afterall, they both detested match making. That made them share something in common. Imran smiled lightly to himself at the last thought.

Syakirah called Saleha again during the weekend. Though this was part of the plan, she honestly cared about the elder women. Even Yasmin realized this.

"Syira, you really care about her, don't you?"

"Yes. I do. I like her a lot. May be she reminds me of my late mother in some ways"

"I think so too".

Two weeks had gone by. Saleha and Syakirah had been in contact since the meeting at Hillview. During her regular check-up at the University Hospital, Saleha and Ani dropped by to visit Hidayat. They accidently met Syakirah. Hidayat was happy to "introduce" Syakirah to his mother and Ani.

Imran unexpectedly came to see Hidayat after one of his business dealings in KL. Unfortunately, Hidayat had gone out with his friends. Then, while passing by the parking lot of the Language Center, Imran saw Syakirah and Yasmin. He stopped the car and they talked for a while. Yasmin noticed Imran's attitude towards her friend had changed.

"Could the meeting three weeks ago have anything to do with it?", asked Yasmin to Syakirah after Imran had left. Syakirah just smiled at Yasmin.

About a month after the plan had started, Ani came to see Saleha to talk about Imran and Syakirah. Saleha didn't look healthy these days. Ani suggested Saleha asked Imran about Syakirah again. Ani noticed the two of them have become friends since the plan. She thanked Allah for that. She didn't want to hope for more than that, but it made her pray that Allah would make the plan for real.

After Maghrib prayer, Saleha went to Imran's room. She found him reading the Holy Qur'an.

> "Allah is the Protector of those who have faith; from the depths
> of darkness He will lead them forth to light; Of those who reject
> faith, the patrons are the Evil ones; from light they will lead them
> to darkness. They will be the companions of the fire to dwell
> therein (forever)" (Al-Baqarah: 257)

He stopped as he saw Saleha standing by the door of his room. He was not surprised when Saleha said she wanted to discuss about him and Syakirah.

"If you really believe she could make me happy, then yes."

"I do. InshaAllah".

She was surprised to hear Imran's answer.

"Imran, why sudden change? I mean… yes, I heard the answer I wanted to hear, but are you sure you want to do this?"

"I guess I've changed. Allah knows best, Mom. And He is the best Planner of all". He smiled peacefully at Saleha.

The next morning Imran called Syakirah. He felt awkward to do what he was about to do. But Umar was right, if he had no intention of marrying her, why would he deceive her into believing it as real. Syakirah had the right to be told the truth of the marriage proposal.

"I love my mother and I know you respect her a lot. There's something you should know".

"Yes", Syakirah replied short while listening attentively to what Imran was saying. She noticed he sounded sober.

"My mother's dying, Syakirah", Imran controlled his sad voice.

Silence.

"Syira", he called Syakirah. Never before he addressed her like this.

"I'm here", Syakirah replied trying hard to withold tears.

"You're okay?", he asked while clearing his throat.

"Yes…I just don't know what to say", Syakirah pretended. In her heart she was crying. She didn't like to be reminded of this. It was like losing her mother again. Then, she continued.

"What do you need me to do?", she asked with honesty.

"I need you to help me with her last wish", Imran began.

Syakirah knew this was the part she had hoped didn't have to happen even though she had agreed to the plan. She was already reliving the chapter of losing her mother. Now she was about to start reliving her history with Manaf. The circumstances might be different but the end result would be the same. She would lose both.

"Yes", Syakirah detected a hesitant in his voice. She knew it was not easy for him to say it. Anybody would find it hard to say something as true or real when it was not. It would be like saying something, which didn't come from the heart. You were not being true to yourself but yet you had to commit to it.

"She wanted so much to have you as my wife", Imran told her straightforwardly.

Silence. Syakirah was fighting with herself whether to agree to this or not. She was about to pretend accepting a man in her life. She already found peace without a man in her life. However she remembered her promise to Ani.

"Syira?", again Imran had to call her after her long pause.

"Yes", she replied short.

"Yes you agree to help?…or just yes you understand what she wanted?", Imran wanted to confirm.

"Yes…for both. I will do it for her, In sha Allah."

"Thank you. Alhamdulillah. Only Allah can repay you".

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Saleha woke up at 4.30 a.m. for her tahajjud prayer. This morning she also did hajat prayer. Later in the morning, she called Syakirah. Syakirah acted surprised when Saleha talked about marriage proposal. Saleha told her that as customarily done, Imran's family would go to her house to meet her parents in KB for the proper marriage proposal. Syakirah felt reluctant to agree. But, as she recalled her talk with Imran the day before, she accepted the proposal. Since the day was Thursday, Syakirah agreed they come on Sunday.

Syira's parents were happy for her when she informed them about the marriage proposal. But she excluded the truth of the whole thing. It would be complicated to think of the consequence then. That was what she kept telling herself. She would be home by Friday evening.

Syakirah explained to Yasmin about the marriage delegation from Imran's family. Part of her wanted to quit the plan. But she thought it would be too late already.

"Syira, I've never thought to see you do this", Yasmin told her.

"Neither do I, Min", she responded.

"I guess, this whole thing really affects me. She is so real to me. I may not get to fullfil my own mother's wish but I'm doing it for Aunt Saleha. At least she would die getting her wish, In sha Allah".

"In sha Allah. What about you…your feeling? And your family. Won't they feel betrayed when this is all over?", asked Yasmin looking concerned at her dear friend.

"I'm too caught up in the frightening thought of losing her that I don't think much of what will happen next. I guess, I'm leaving it all in Allah's hands".

"The marriage will be valid?", Yasmin said.

"I will be, In sha Allah. That's the scariest part of this plan. I fear Allah Min. I feel like commiting a sin to make a play of something as sacred as a marriage", she told Yasmin.

"And those who fear the displeasure of their Lord" (70:27)

Syakirah continued, "In Islam, you cannot toy around with the idea of marriage. You either commit yourself to it in Allah or you don't".

"Imran could plan something with the Imam. Do you think he would do that?", suggested Yasmin.

"He didn't mention anything of the sort. So I don't know", responded Syakirah.

"What will happen next…divorce…or separation?"

Syakirah shook her head lightly.

"Imran is a good man….if only he would want this for real…", Yasmin said. She had not known someone like him before who would sacrifice his own future to make his mother happy. In Islam the one most deserving of a man's love and attention would be his own mother. This was what Yasmin felt Imran was doing.

Syakirah tried to search in herself the truth of what Yasmin had just said. She needed to know Imran more to agree with her friend.

"Too early to go into that Min. We're just starting to know each other. Even that is done not for the purpose of a real relationship."

"Do you hope for one?"

"It's been too long since I gave hope for a man. I've found my peace…in Allah. That's enough for me".

"Till when?"

"Wallahu'alam…I put my trust in Allah. He knows the best….the best Planner".

"Allah, there is no god but He; and in Allah therefore
let the believers put their trust" (At-Taghabun: 13)

****

The engagement took place according to the Malay traditional custom with Islamic values not forgotten. Her family was very strict in observing Malay traditional customs Islamically. It was a small ceremony attended by a few close relatives. Saleha came with Ani and Hanim, accompanied by Imran and two of their relatives. Imran came but as customarily done, in observance of Islamic values, he stayed in the car and didn't take part in the ceremony. Saleha placed the engagement ring on Syakirah's finger. After the ceremony, the two families agreed that the engagement would be for 2 months. They had decided to do a small wedding late June, a week after school began a new semester. Syakirah's parents preferred to have the wedding a week before school opened. Since Shakirah had learned that Saleha would have her doctor check-up during that week, she insisted doing it a week after.

They had a small family gathering after the ceremony. Imran watched how happy her mother was with Syakirah. It would break her heart, he thought, if she had known the truth - the conspiracy between him and Syakirah in Ani's plan. Syakirah explained that she had to invigilate a test, the first day of the final examination week. So, she joined Saleha's party to KL by flight. After Syakirah had left for the college, they continued the trip to JB.

The whole family and Imran's friends were happy for him. He received calls from closed friends congratulating him. They had learned about the engagement from Iskandar and Umar. Imran received a call from Melissa who also congratulated him. He and Dato' Annuar had lunch together during the week. Melissa was out of town on some projects. He said he was thinking that Imran and Melissa had something going on. Imran told him what he had told Umar. The old man understood well and accepted the fact that

Imran and her daughter were not meant for each other. Imran was glad because he respected the man who was one of his late father's good old friends.

CHAPTER 20

During the first two weeks of their engagement both Imran and Syakirah were busy. Imran worked on KS Holdings new project while keeping tab on Saleha. He had to put a happy face to disguise the heart-breaking feeling in him. Syakirah was busy marking papers to turn in her students' grades since the semester was ending soon. They would talk ocassionally to discuss about Saleha. Both were worried if anything would happen before the wedding, which would be in a few weeks time. Imran and Saleha went to the college to visit Hidayat before his final examinations began. The three of them went out for dinner with Syakirah. Syakirah told Yasmin she had grown to love the family.

"Don't say I didn't warn you Syira. This is a game of feelings. No matter how much you want to make it unreal, it wouldn't stay that way for long. Especially when dealing with nice people like them. It's like what had happened at the beginning of knowing Imran never existed, right?", Yasmin spoke analyzing the matter. She recalled every incident relating to Imran and Syakirah. She remembered how displeased her

friend was of a man named Imran Hakim. But now she realized things were changing in front of her eyes. In a way it was beautiful to witness. The miracle work of Allah she thought to herself.

Syakirah nodded in agreement. The more she knew Imran, she began to slowly erase her earlier impression of him. From what she had seen, he might not have all Saleha's traits but he was a good son, brother, friend and Muslim businessman. He seemed professional in work, obedient and responsible to his family and of all she found out he was a good practicing Muslim. During their occasional talks, he sometimes touched on the importance of solat in keeping faith in Allah. From the way he spoke of it, she could tell he didn't become religious due to the circumstances he was in. He had been a good Muslim man for a long time. It enticed her sometimes to discover the real Imran Hakim. So mysterious. Hard to tell the real person until you get to really know him to know his true colors. In a way, she thanked Allah for the opportunity to learn the real him. She could have misinterpreted him for the rest of her life. And to think badly of your own brother in Islam was sinful!

> "O ye who believe! Shun much suspicion; for lo! Some suspicion is a crime. And spy not, neither backbite one another. Would any one of you love to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Ye abhor that! And keep your duty (to Allah) Lo! Allah is relenting, Merciful!
>
> (Al-Hujurat: 12)

****

It was Friday, the last day of the three-week final examination. Hidayat came to see Syakirah to say goodbye before going home for the semester holiday. He had been so happy ever since she got engaged with his brother. Since he was away from home during the ceremony, he had called Imran after the engagement to congratulate his eldest brother. He had asked when his brother and Syakirah became serious in relationship. Imran didn't give him a definite answer. He also went to congratulate Syakirah for the engagement. Since Syakirah had helped him in his writings for the Daily Pine, the new level of relationship made them more comfortable while working.

"Soon you would be my sister-in-law Miss Syakirah … I mean Kak Syira", Hidayat ended their short talk at her office.

"InshaAllah, Hidayat…InshaAllah", Syakirah responded thinking that in five weeks he would be her brother-in-law. They both laughed.

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Syakirah decided to go home only after completing her work for the coming semester and finishing her preparation for the coming English workshop at Pine College. She spent the first two weeks of the semester holiday preparing with a team of English lecturers for the English courses they had been assigned to teach.

"Syira, for someone who's getting married in a few weeks time, you sure don't look anxious", Mei Lin told her. She was among a few friends who knew about her engagement with Imran. Syakirah was very discreet about her engagement to Imran. She was uncomfortable at first when her friends started to call her a bride considering the real situation. Yasmin said her friend could not do anything about it. In the end she just accepted it.

"Really? Well, I must be a cool bride!", Syakirah joked with Mei Lin. She remembered talking to Saleha the night before about being a busy bride. During her busy days, she and Saleha were in contact often. Early of the week Ani and Saleha dropped by her apartment after Saleha monthly medical check-up.

"No, seriously when are you going home?", Mei Lin asked.

"Well, now that we've completed this work, I still have some stuff to take care before the workshop ", explained Syakirah referring to the workshop at the end of the week.

"Wow! You are a busy bride indeed, Miss Syakirah!", commented Mei Lin and they both laughed.

Imran called her a few times talking about their plan. Syakirah would ask him about Saleha. She was glad not having to see Imran much during the engagement time. Yasmin had been teasing her that she might fall for Imran soon. But, she was determined to stick to the plan and not think about that.

****

When the English worksop ended, she took a week off to help her family prepare for the wedding. They were happy but asked her to stay home until the wedding. She couldn't because she had to go back to KL for the new semester. She told them she would be home two days before the wedding, which was on Friday. She had known it would be hectic but it was in the plan that she had agreed to take part.

A day before she left for the wedding, Syakirah had asked Yasmin to help her with some shopping for the ceremony. They were leaving the shopping Mall when they saw Imran and Melissa with Dato' Annuar. Syakirah didn't know Imran was in KL.

"Don't you want to go and greet them?", Yasmin asked her.

"No", she replied short while shaking her head lightly. She continued, "Min, remember this is a plan I'm in…not real, ok!"

"I know but you could extend the plan and make it more real by talking to Imran's friends".

"I can't. For all I know the beautiful lady beside him could be his real choice!", Syakirah responded. She remembered Ani telling her about Imran and Melissa, which had caused Saleha to worry.

"Well… you have a point there, but I have a feeling they are just business colleagues".

"You and your feeling again….", Syakirah smiled while shaking her head. Then, she added, "Not my business to interfere, Min".

"Don't sound too reserved, Syira. Or may be you're falling for him? Are you, Syira?", Yasmin asked her.

Syakirah looked straight at her friend. She shook her head and said, "Nope. InshaAllah I won't!". Right at that moment she did feel different. In a split second, she doubted herself. Maybe Yasmin was right. Could she have just said a lie to herself?

CHAPTER 21

Saleha had grown to love Syakirah whom had cared so much for the elder woman. During the last week before the wedding, Syakirah talked to Saleha every two nights who was preparing the wedding with Ani. As the day was approaching, Syakirah grew more worried. She told Ani about it and Ani advised her to keep faith. She prayed to Allah days and nights for Saleha to live long enough to see her wish come true.

Yasmin sent her to the airport. She promised Syakirah to be at the wedding.

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The house was full of happy noise when the groom party arrived. By 3.30 p.m, all were seated in the living room waiting for the procession to begin. Syakirah was in the bride's room, which was just across the living room. Yasmin and her sister, Nadhirah, were with her. Before the ceremony began the Imam entered her room with her father to ask for her agreement in the marriage. She glanced at Yasmin. She felt to say something and was about to open her mouth when she heard the Imam asking for her signature in the marriage certificate. She signed it in front of the four of them. Yasmin watched her friend. When the men left the room, Syakirah grasped Yasmin's hand. Yasmin felt Syakirah's hand was cold. Yasmin just smiled at her and nodded in agreement with what Syakirah had just done. Syakirah whispered to her, "I almost chicken out. Alhamdulillah, I didn't!".

Everyone heard the Imam's short talk and advice about marriage. Then, the time came for the a'kad. The bride was asked to witness the ceremony, so, Syakirah stepped out of her room. Yasmin and Nadhirah accompanied her, sitting close to the door of her room watching the groom who was facing the Imam. As Imran was saying the a'kad, she wanted to see Saleha's face but she felt tears. She hid the tears by looking down as any bride would do in shyness during her wedding. She knew her tears were happy tears for Saleha because now the woman's wish had come true. Then it was done. She heard happy voice from the witnesses of the wedding. She was about to wipe her tears and lifted her head when someone shouted help. Somebody had collapsed. Shakirah heard Imran shout, "Mom!".

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> "He is the Irresistible (watching) from above over His worshippers
> and He sets guardians over you. At length when death approaches
> one of you, Our angels take his souls and they never fail their duty"
> (Al-An'am: 61)

There was still daylight outside the hospital building but the hallway just outside the ICU of the Hospital University of Science Malaysia was gloomy. Sad faces, some with teary eyes and sobs were waiting outside Saleha's room. The members of the two families were there. Imran and Ani came in the ambulance with Saleha. Yasmin came with Syakirah and her parents. Hidayat and Hanim followed in another car.

Syakirah who had been sitting with her parents and Yasmin stood up and walked towards Hanim and Hidayat. As she was approaching the two siblings, Hidayat looked at her and bowed in a sob. Syakirah felt heart-broken looking at his young face all teary-eyed. It reminded her of her brother, Ashraff, when her mother passed away. Sensing Syakirah's presence, Hanim looked up. Syakirah sat next to her and offered her a hug. They held each other. Syakirah tried to calm Hanim who was crying softly on her shoulder. She glanced at Yasmin.

Yasmin watched her friend with her new in-laws. Syakirah was a member of this family now. The wedding was done and the witnesses agreed to its validity. As she was studying the new bond between the three of them, she wondered where would all this leave Syakirah. What would happen to the plan now? What would Imran do?

As she was thinking about the answers to these questions, the door to Saleha's room was opened. Imran walked out somberly. His eyes were red but there were no tears on his face. Hanim and Hidayat quickly walked towards their brother. Syakirah slowly followed as Yasmin and her parents stood up waiting for news from Imran. Ani was still in the room with Saleha. Before she could reach the three siblings, Syakirah could tell they had lost Saleha. Imran held Hidayat and Hanim. He whispered to them and they walked in to see Saleha.

Imran walked to a chair and sat. Placing his elbows on his thighs he bowed down with hands on his head. Syakirah watched him. She was unsure what to do. They were legally married but only on paper, not in their hearts and minds. She walked to his right side and sat beside him. She was surprised of herself feeling so natural towards the man next to her. She placed her hand on his shoulder and softly said to him, "It's going to be fine, Imran. In sha Allah. Be patient and be strong. Just remember, "To Allah we belong and to him we return (2: 156)". Syakirah paused and continued, " I'm here if you need me". Imran straightened his back and turned to face Syakirah. He smiled weakly at her and said, "Thank you". Syakirah nodded.

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The family decided to bring the body to JB the next morning. Ani and Hanim stayed at Syakirah's house with Yasmin. Syakirah and her parents decided to follow the family to JB. Yasmin had to return to KL to take care of things for Syakirah at the college. After making calls to Iskandar and arranging everything at the hospital, Imran and Hidayat went to the mosque nearby the HUSM. They made du'a for Saleha. They stayed at the hospital until morning.

> "And Lord! Bestow on them Thy mercy even as they
> cherished me in childhood" (17:24)

After making a call to her family, Ani sat with Syakirah's family for a while. Hanim and Yasmin were there too. Ani did not tell them about Saleha's cancer. She told them that it was something internal. Syakirah excused the lady and accompanied her to her room.

"She was beautiful, Syira. Her final moments were beautiful", Ani began as they were sitting on the bed in the bride's room. Ani surveyed the beautiful moderately decorated room. "She'd love this room", Ani continued and stopped as she was choking with tears.

Syakirah held the elder woman's hand. She was herself crying but tried hard to withhold her tears. "I know she would have, Aunt Ani", Syakirah responded.

"She was happy, Syira. She didn't talk much. She was not in pain like she used to whenever she had an attack like that. There were cold sweats on her forehead …a good sign of death said the ustaz at the mosque."

"She was a good person. I knew her in a short time, but I could tell", said Syakirah and Ani nodded.

"She smiled at me and at Imran. And Allah's name was ceaseless on her lips. Imran saw how happy his mother was that her wish had come true".

Syakirah was silent as she was listening to Ani. Then Ani paused and looked at Syakirah. "Thank you, Syira. Thank you so much. May Allah bless you for all that you have done for her. I know where you and Imran stand on this wedding. Now, the wedding is a remembrance of her. And I wish it would stay like that forever. I'm sorry to say this. Don't worry I'm not breaking my promise, but….". Ani stopped herself from discomforting Syakirah with her hope for a real marriage commitment between imran and Syakirah.

Syakirah's face was soaked with tears. She knew what Ani wanted to say. Right at that moment, she herself wanted to agree to her, to break her promise to herself…to stay married to Imran to keep the remembrance of Saleha and the wedding. But she withheld the thought. She didn't want to give a false idea to the older woman. They were both not in their right state of mind at that time. They had just lost Saleha.

They were caught up deep in a grieving sad feeling. Wanting to hold on to Saleha's memory was one thing, but her own life was real, what she and Imran had promised to do in the plan was real. The wedding was only a plan. As real as it was, it would be ended when the plan expired. Somehow she didn't want to think about the ending.

"You know, she even bought the two of you a gift. It's somewhere in her room at home. She wanted to present it to the two of you when you come to JB". Syakirah was crying again.

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As they reached the house in JB, families and relatives were waiting. The wedding celebration turned into a funeral ceremony. Iskandar was helped by the older relatives to get everything ready for the burial. Imran was glad that his brother managed well. Iskandar noticed Imran looked exhausted. Imran did not sleep a wink at the hospital. He spent the whole night praying and reading the Quran. Hidayat who was with him had fallen asleep.

When the body was attended and prayed, they left for the burial. Syakirah walked with Hanim to accompany her sister-in-law at the cemetary. For the first time since knowing the family, Syakirah witnessed how attached Saleha's children were with each other. The bond between them was obvious. Their relatives were nice to them but the four siblings seemed to cling to each other more for support. It was as if the bond they shared was enough to get the strength to face the loss of their beloved mother. It was almost 11.30 a.m when the burial was completed. Imran agreed with the elder relatives to hold a tahlil on that night.

Hanim showed Syakirah Imran's room - their wedding room. As she entered the room, she felt touched and felt the presence of her late mother-in-law. Everything in the room had a feminine touch. All in pastel reflected the personality of the person who decorated the room - Saleha. Later, Ani came to join them.

"Abang Imran left everything about this room to Mom and Aunt Ani", explained Hanim about the room. Ani smiled sadly. "She was so happy with the preparation. She would have love you so much, Kak Syira".

"I did and always will love her, Hanim. InshaAllah", said Syakirah and Hanim nodded. Ani watched them. Hanim left after explaining a few things about the room to Syakirah.

"Syira, I hope you're not uncomfortable here. I promised as soon as all this is over, we'll settle with the plan, InshaAllah. I'll need to talk to both of you and Imran when the time comes, InshaAllah", Ani told Syakirah.

Syakirah nodded in agreement and said, "We'll deal with that later, InshaAllah. It's just too much right now… especially for you, Imran and this family. The loss I feel is nothing compared to what you all feel. So, leave it to Allah to take care of it. He knows the best". Ani nodded and smiled weakly in agreement.

Syakirah told Ani that her parents wanted to leave the next morning. She, on the other hand, would stay there for 2 more days. Since the semester had just begun, she was not allowed to take a long holiday. It would be a good excuse for the plan too. Nobody would suspect anything about the "planned" wedding.

Imran and his brother had been busy with the preparation for the tahlil. It was almost 3.00 p.m when he felt too tired and wanted to take a nap. Imran forgot that Hanim had told him 'his wife' was in his room. As he entered the room, he saw Syakirah was standing near the window looking out. She was wearing her praying clothes and holding the Holy Quran in her hands.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to interrupt. I must have forgotten. Hanim told….", he was interrupted by Syakirah.

"It's okay. This is your room, Imran. Don't apologize, please. I was about to go out and see if they might need some help", Syakirah made an excuse. She didn't want to cause complication to Imran. He had been through a lot since the last 24 hours. It was the least she could do for him.

Imran nodded lightly. He was too tired to talk or to argue. He needed sleep. Syakirah went to the bathroom to wear her hijab. When she came out, Imran was fast asleep on the bed. She quietly left the room and walked to the kitchen.

It was almost Asr time when Syakirah entered Imran's room. He was in the bathroom cleaning himself. Syakirah waited outside. When he came out, he saw Syakirah and smiled slightly at her. "I'm going to the masjid".

Syakirah nodded and walked to the room. As she was closing the door, Imran turned. He told Syakirah that he would be in the study room that night and the rest of the nights Syakirah was there. She nodded again with a light smile.

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The house slowly became quiet when relatives and friends went back soon after the tahlil. Some relatives stayed for a while to help them clean up. The day had been a long one for everyone. As soon as their relatives left, Hanim, Hidayat and Syakirah's parents retired to bed. Iskandar and Marina were the last two to leave the house. Imran and Syakirah saw them out. Iskandar congratulated them for the wedding. Marina whispered to Syakirah, "Take good care of him. You're the only woman he's got now".

As they both were walking to their separate rooms, Imran stopped and said, "Syira, thank you again".

"You're welcome. But I hope you'd stop saying that. I'm just doing what I can. Alhamdulillah, all went well today", Syakirah responded.

They stood in the empty living room. Both felt tired.

Imran closed his eyes and nodded lightly. "Are you still leaving on Monday?", Imran asked.

"Yes. I'm sorry I couldn't stay for the last night of tahlil", Syakirah said apologetically.

"I understand. It's okay. What you have done so far is unreturnable. I'm grateful. Alhamdulillah", Imran told her. He gave her a smile, then continued.

"Syira, about the plan ...", Imran said but Syakirah interrupted to stop him.

"That can wait. Let's see this whole thing settle first, In sha Allah", Syakirah said referring to the tahlil. "Also, Aunt Ani wants to see both of us. So, we'll wait for her, In sha Allah", she continued.

"In sha Allah".

She did not want to go into this yet. From the hard look on Imran's face, she could tell he was hurting at the mention of the plan. Somehow they both felt bad about having to carry out the plan even though they knew it was the best gift they had given to Saleha.

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Imran had been in his study room since after Fajr. He was discreet not to make Hanim, Hidayat or Syakirah's parents suspect anything of the plan. He went to Hidayat's room and talked to his youngest brother. Hidayat had been very quiet since they came back from the cemetary the day before. This was not like him but Imran thought Hidayat needed time to deal with the lost. Iskandar came that morning to see if they needed his help for the second night of tahlil. Imran asked him to talk to Hidayat and persuade their youngest brother to spend time with Iskandar's little twins. They agreed Hidayat was still in shocked and it would be good to get him out of the house for a while. Hidayat agreed to go with Iskandar.

After sending her parents to the airport, Syakirah helped Hanim to see things for the second tahlil. They felt comfortable in the company of each other. Syakirah felt the presence of Saleha in her new sister-in-law. The natural bonding she had felt for Saleha continued with Hanim, whom was also beginning to feel closer to Syakirah.

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The tahlil ended at almost 10 p.m. Imran walked Umar to his car.

"Syira said she's leaving tomorrow. So, what's going to happen next?", Umar asked.

"The plan will have to be dissolved. Aunt Ani wants to see both of us", Imran told Umar.

"That part I could guess. But what will happen to the marriage? Are you going to let her go…a divorce? Because the marriage is valid", asked Umar straightforwardly.

"I don't know. Part of me is staying true to the plan. I respect Syakirah especially for all she has done. But I've no feeling for her to commit to this marriage. Yet, another part of me wants to hold on to

it….may be keeping it for a while because the marriage somehow is a connection … a bond to my mother … And I can't let go of it yet".

"Does Syira know this…your second feeling about the marriage?", inquired Umar in a concerned voice.

"No", Imran replied softly. Umar could read from his face how troubled Imran was feeling.

"She's a woman, Imran. It won't be fair for her".

"I know. I've to tell her and ask her to give me some time".

"Do it tomorrow, then, In sha Allah".

"InshaAllah", agreed Imran.

After Umar had left, Imran recalled a verse he had read regarding divorce:

> "O ye who believe! When ye marry believing woman and
> then divorce them before ye touched them,no period of Iddah
> have to count in respect of them; so give them a present and
> set them free in a handsome manner" (Al-Ahzab: 49)

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Syakirah said goodbye to Hanim, Hidayat, Iskandar and Marina. Ani called her to say goodbye and promised to see her soon. Imran drove her to the airport. They were both quiet until they were half way to the airport.

"Syira, I've to ask something".

"Yes".

"About this marriage. We both do not know when we'll see Aunt Ani. So, I need to ask you to wait for a while".

"I guess so too".

"It's not just that. I feel selfish for what I'm about to say. "

"I'll try to understand, InshaAllah".

"The marriage is a bond to my mother", explained Imran.

"A remembrance of her", Syakirah added.

Imran nodded. " I need time to let go of it".

"So, the plan will continue longer then?"

"To be frank, the minute she died there was no plan anymore. We're left to deal with what's left".

Syakirah agreed. She didn't have much to lose. She only needed to tell her family about the whole thing. Very few people at the college knew about the wedding, except a few close friends whom she trusted would regard the wedding as her personal affairs. She also reminded Hidayat to keep the knowledge of the wedding to himself considering they're both at the college.

"So?", asked Syakirah short while turning to look at Imran.

"I just need you to let me hold on to this marriage for a while till I could figure out what to do next", Imran finally told her.

For the first time she saw something peaceful and honest in the man who was legally her husband. She studied him and felt touched by what he had just said. It sounded selfish but he was just a human being.

"I understand that", was her response.

"I know I sound selfish. I'd understand if you can't wait to dissolve this marriage".

"There's nothing for me to rush. It'd be nice to feel her presence for a while. And we can be friends", Syakirah said and smiled at her last sentence. She meant that.

Imran glanced and smiled at her.

"So, you're okay with this?", asked Imran to confirm.

"Yes, InshaAllah."

"Thank you, my friend", Imran teased her with name and smiled. Syakirah returned his smile. They both could feel a sudden change of air in their conversation.

"You're welcome".

> "And He hath put affection between their hearts; not if thou hadst spent all that is in the earth could thou have produced that affection but Allah hath done it; for He is Exalted in might Wise"
>
> (8: 63)

CHAPTER 22

Syakirah was just heading for the Language Center when she saw Yasmin's car pulling up to the parking lot. Her friend signalled her to wait. She was happy to be back at the college after a heart wrenching experience for the last couple of days. After getting back the day before, she busied herself with preparation for the new semester. She thought about Saleha constantly. She prayed for her and read the Holy Quran for her. The conversation she had with Imran on their way to the airport somehow helped to keep away heaviness in her heart. It was like a big episode of her life had just passed. And now she was waiting for all of it to come to an end. She decided not to think of what to come and to leave it all in Allah's hands. Just one thing she had to do soon. She had to tell her parents about the plan. And she sought guidance from Allah to break this to her family.

"All went well in JB?", asked Yasmin as they were both walking to the Language Center.

"Yes, Alhamdulillah. All was beautifully done", replied Syakirah.

"And the marriage?", Yasmin asked what she had wanted to ask.

"We talked… Imran and I. And we agreed to let things simmer for a while. We'll get into that with Aunt Ani soon, InshaAllah".

Yasmin was surprised to see the calmness in Syakirah as she was explaining this. "So, you're okay with this?", she asked.

"Yes. I was surprised at myself too. But I have faith in Imran now to think that he would not hurt me intentionally. He needed time and I've nothing to lose by giving it to him", explained Syakirah. Yasmin listened attentively.

"I'm speechless. All I could say, I feel proud to be your friend. Alhamdulillah. You've been through a lot in your life Syira. And here is to add another one to it".

"Well, Alhamdulillah. Allah helped me manage them all with the strength He granted me with. And a friend like you to keep my spirit up when I need a push", Syakirah said smilingly at Yasmin.

"Alhamdulillah, Syira! That's what a friend is for", Yasmin responded happily. Then continued, "I just wish that the two…", Yasmin stopped as Syakirah turned to her.

"I know your wish, Min", Syakirah interrupted her.

"Have you ever thought of it too?", asked Yasmin.

"The thought crossed my mind, but I don't want to keep a high hope for it. Honestly, I like Imran now. But we need time to know each other. If it turns out he has already had someone of his choice, I would have to accept it. So, I'm leaving it all to Allah, Min".

> "If you put your whole trust in Allah., as you ought,
> He most certainly will satisfy your needs, as He satisfies
> those of the birds. They come out hungry in the morning,
> but return full to their nests". (Tirmidhi)

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Imran stopped by Hidayat's room to see if he had everything ready. They were leaving that morning to KL. Ani had asked Imran to give her a lift to her friend's boutique. They could also meet Syakirah together.

"I'm ready to go", Hidayat said to his brother.

Imran noticed Hidayat had lost some weight since their mother's death. It had been five days since the funeral. He was worried but Hidayat told him not to worry when Imran inquired about it. He decided to ask Syakirah to keep an eye on his brother.

They reached the college at around 2 p.m. After leaving Hidayat at his hostel, Imran sent Ani to the boutique. They promised to meet at Syakirah's place later in the evening before Imran left for JB. Imran called Syakirah to tell her about their visit.

"How's Hidayat doing?", asked Syakirah.

"Not so good I think. That's part of the reason I want to see you besides the meeting with Aunt Ani", explained Imran in a worried voice.

"In sha Allah, I'll be home by 4.30 p.m", said Syakirah.

"Okay, we'll be there after Asar, In sha Allah".

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Syakirah was helping Lily move some boxes to her car when they saw Imran's car approaching the house. Lily wanted to move out and stay with her friend from home who had just started working in KL. Syakirah had asked her to invite her friend stay with them telling Lily that she and Imran had not made a final decision where to settle down. She said Lily could share the house with her friend. However, Lily insisted leaving anyway and she respected her wish.

Syakirah introduced Imran to Lily before she left. As they were walking into the house, Syakirah asked him about Ani. He said the elder woman would be there a bit later. Imran took a seat and looked around the house while Syakirah went to the kitchen to prepare some drinks.

Syakirah looked at the man sitting in her living room. That was the first time they were together alone. Suddenly what Yasmin said a few days ago about her wish for Syakirah and Imran came to her mind. She quickly pushed the thought aside.

"This is a nice house you've got, Syira", complimented Imran.

Syakirah sat across Imran before responding to his compliment about her house.

"Alhamdulillah. I like it because it's a bit far from the noises. Probably the most peaceful and quiet area. And that's something expensive to find in KL", explained Syakirah with a smile.

Imran nodded and smiled back in agreement with her explanation. Their eyes met and Syakirah quickly moved her attention to the drinks. She poured the tea into the cups and invited him to drink.

"Hidayat's changed a lot since that day. I'm kind of worried about him", began Imran changing the subject.

"Did you talk to him about it?", asked Syakirah.

"Yes. But he said he's okay. So, I don't know. Iskandar said we should keep an eye on him. He was very close with Mom, so, the death must have hit him hard."

"I guess I understand. It happened to my brother Ashraff when my mother died", Syakirah explained.

Syakirah told Imran about her late mother and how the family coped with the death. Both never mentioned much about family background since they had known each other. They were like two new friends getting to know each other and they were comfortable with the topic.

They were so engrossed in their conversation when Ani gave a salam at the door. She was happy to see the couple in front of her. Saleha would have loved to see the newly weds she thought. Syakirah invited her in and they asked how each other was doing.

"I tried to get here sooner but you know things at a boutique, Syira", Ani explained.

"Do you have to be back tonight too, Aunt Ani?", asked Syakirah.

"No, dear. I'm leaving tomorrow afternoon. I've another meeting tomorrow with a friend", answered Ani.

"So, you could stay here tonight. Lily would be back tomorrow to pick up the rest of her stuff", said Syakirah.

"That sounds like a good offer, Aunt Ani", added Imran.

Ani smiled at Syakirah. She had thought of asking Syakirah herself to stay overnight at the house. So, the woman accepted the offer. Imran told them he had to be on the road after Maghrib.

"About this marriage, how do you two feel about it?", asked Ani.

Syakirah looked at Imran who then turned to face Ani. The elder woman waited to hear from both of them. In her mind, she was hoping Syakirah and Imran would decide to honour Saleha's wish and stay married. But she also knew these young people had no intention of being married in the first place if it had not been because of the circumstances.

"Aunt Ani, this was just a plan at the beginning. We wanted to give the last gift to her. And we did. So, as true as it is, the marriage is a real gift and somehow it has become hers when we finally did it", explained Imran.

Syakirah watched Imran and glanced at Ani who was attentively paying her attention to every word uttered.

Imran paused and continued, " It's like now she has left us something to inherit… which is part of her… something precious".

"Are you saying that you both want to…", Ani stopped. She looked at the couple anxiously with an excited look.

"No, Aunt Ani", interrupted Syakirah to avoid giving a false idea to Ani. Then she continued, "What Imran is saying is he needs time to let go of this marriage",

"But you can keep this…don't have to let it go", said Ani in a hopeful voice.

"We've discussed the other day. And we're okay with the way things are right now", Imran said.

"So, Syira has already told you that she knew Saleha was sick and was playing in the plan too. I mean right from the beginning?", asked Ani.

Syakirah didn't expect Imran would have to know this. But, since the plan would be dissolved soon, it would not make a difference if he knew. They all knew what the ending would be.

Imran looked puzzled. Suddenly he realized why Syakirah was easy to agree to his request. Now he knew Syakirah also wasn't serious and was playing in the plan. Syakirah explained to him how Ani got her to agree with the plan. There was a relief on Imran's face.

" I feel a bit better now. I don't have to feel so bad. I thought I was playing with your feeling when I requested your help to agree to the marriage proposal. I would be selfish to offer you something that I had no intention of giving and to cancel it after my mother's wish was fulfilled. Honestly, I did all for her … I couldn't think of any other ways at that time", explained Imran. "So, it would be easier to let go of this marriage when the time comes", he continued.

The three of them felt better now that everything was out in the open.

"I gave my consent in all…to Aunt Ani and to you. It wasn't easy because I've never done something like this before but now I know it was worth it."

"Thank you Syira", thanked Ani.

"Same here, Syira" added Imran.

"You're both welcome".

"So, how long this will go on? I just feel bad knowing that Syakirah has to sacrifice her time again. She's given us so much till now."

"Only Allah can repay you, Syira. I can't say yet right now. But I promised this will end soon, InshaAllah", Imran said.

"InshaAllah. Let's leave this to Allah for now. I just need to know Syira is okay in all these", responded Ani.

"Yes. I'm fine, Aunt Ani. I just need to tell my parents soon. I'm sure they would understand, InshaAllah. Soon all will be over". Right at that moment she felt everything was almost over. But why didn't she feel relief anymore?

Before leaving Imran asked Syakirah to keep in touch with him about Hidayat. Syakirah agreed to call him if there was anything about his brother. Ani just watched how comfortable the two of them seemed. It was as if, they have known each other long. If only they both wanted to keep the marriage she thought.

After Imran had gone, Syakirah busied herself with her class preparation. Ani stayed in Lily's room taking a rest. Just as Syakirah was about to retire to bed, Ani came out.

"Syira, there's something I should have told you earlier. It's about Imran", Ani began and she told Syakirah about Kaira.

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Imran reached home at a quarter past twelve.   The house was quite. It seemed so empty he thought. He went to clean himself and do solat Isha'. After reading the holy Quran, he went to the study room.

He took out Kaira's picture. On the back of it was written: "I love you always...every where....Kaira". She had said that the picture and the words would keep their hearts close while they were apart till their wedding day. Imran said to himself, "Ya Allah, I really need your guidance. I still love my wife. Kaira's no longer with me, but I don't want to lose the memory of her. I've lost both women I love. What's the use with the wedding if my mother's dead. The wedding was a final gift for her. Something to remember her by. Should I take the gift back and end this marriage?"

CHAPTER 23

Two weeks had passed since Saleha's death. Imran and Syakirah talked to each other every now and then about Hidayat. They were happy that Hidayat was doing fine. Syakirah told him Hidayat looked thinner but he was managing his studies well. Iskandar had asked Imran when Syakirah would move to JB. He said they decided to stay apart until the end of the semester. He thought of telling Iskandar about the truth. But he needed time. He needed to be alone first and get some space to think about what to do next. He talked to Umar who then agreed Imran take some time off to think about the whole thing. He told Umar that in a way he regretted not getting married sooner for his mother.

"Don't regret Imran. There's a good cause behind everything Allah made", Umar reminded him.

"I should know that".

"So, when and where?", Umar asked about the place Imran was going to go.

"The place with the beach", Imran replied. Umar nodded acknowledging the place.

"May Allah show you the way. And you'll come back with a decision that is good for everyone, InshaAllah".

"InshaAllah".

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Imran decided to stay at the resort for 2 days. Umar was complaining to him because he wanted to bring some of his work with him. Imran said he needed to occupy his time with work too. The second day he was there, he met an old friend, Izwan, whom he had not met for a long time. The last time they were together was during the fateful event, the day that he lost Kaira forever. Izwan was having a short seminar at the resort. They talked about old days at the university in UK. Izwan told him that he and Ita had three children and they had resided in Pahang for the last five years. They were moving to live in JB the next month because the company he worked with had appointed him a manager at the branch in JB. Imran told him about Saleha's death and the wedding.

"Congratulations! It took you a long time to remarry. How come she's not with you? I thought this would be like a honeymoon time considering the circumstances", asked Izwan teasingly about Syakirah.

Imran decided to explain all to Izwan since he knew Imran's history of life. Imran hoped that maybe Izwan could give him some advice with the decision he wanted to make.

"So, how do you feel about her now?", asked Izwan.

"We've become to like each other now. We started bad because of the match-making thing. She wasn't serious in this marriage from the beginning. I found out she too was making a play for my mother".

"But that was before you too really got to know each other well. And both of you didn't know it would go this far and this way".

"But to commit to a marriage with her I feel like I can't … I won't."

"Because of Kaira?", asked Izwan.

"I still love her. She was my wife", answered Imran.

"And this is your wife too even though you married her as part of a plan."

"My mother loved her, I know that. But I don't".

"Why make her wait by keeping the marriage? I know you're honoring your mother's wish but she wouldn't like it this way of honoring it. I wouldn't. I'm sure your mother and Kaira wanted you happy. The way I see it, Allah has again blessed you with a good wife. The different is this time marriage came first. You could still make it work. In sha Allah".

Imran smiled and said, "In sha Allah. But, she may not even want to stay and make it work".

"You've to ask her. And that would be appropriate to do only after you've known each other well. If your mother liked her so much, I'm sure Syakirah could make you happy, In sha Allah".

"That's what everyone wants… for me to be happy. I thought I was happy. I have Kaira".

"But she's dead. You're alive and so is Syakirah. You both have so much to live for, In sha Allah. Seek guidance from Allah. I don't want to decide for you but I hope you'll be happy Imran and I mean real happiness with a real living person. Consider keeping this marriage…not just for your mother but for accepting a second chance from Allah".

****

Syakirah decided to tell her parents the truth about the wedding. At first she wanted to wait for Imran's decision but she thought her folks needed to be prepared if an annulment or a divorce might take place. Her father and stepmother were upset for her but she made them understand why she and Imran had to take the plan. They promised to treat Imran unprejudiced when the time came.

Imran had not called her since coming back from the resort. He came to visit Syakirah when he was in KL the day before going to the resort. She told him Hidayat was better. They invited Hidayat for dinner at Syakirah's house. Imran and Syakirah were careful not to let Hidayat suspect the truth of the wedding. They discussed about Hanim's wedding, which was set during the semester break.

Syakirah was alone in her office after finishing her double period class. She heard from Hidayat's lecturer that he had not come to class for two days. While she was thinking of calling the warden to inquire about Hidayat, Yasmin came by her office.

"How long is this waiting going to be?", Yasmin asked worried. She closed the door and sat infront of Syakirah.

"When he's ready. It maybe anytime now, In sha Allah", Syakirah answered short. Imran would have made a decision she thought. The marriage would be dissolved soon.

"It's been almost what…three weeks now? I just pray that it will come to a final say", said Yasmin.

"Why?".

"You may not know it. Anyone may not see it, but I could see it. You're hurting Syira. It was like when you described how you were after breaking up with Manaf."

"What do you see?", asked Syakirah.

"At first I thought because you've missed Aunt Saleha so much but now you look like you're about to lose someone you love. Do you love him, Syira?"

Syakirah gave in to her feeling. She admitted her feeling for Imran to Yasmin. She confessed she didn't want to go through this again after Manaf. She was afraid of investing love and losing it. But Allah made it happen naturally. She was in love with a man who was legally her husband. She cried and Yasmin was relief because Syakirah finally admitted her feeling.

"Maybe I was born to be a failure in love, Min", said Syira.

Yasmin lightly shook her head. She felt pity for her friend. She believed Allah must have reserved something good for Syakirah after what she had gone through.

"Imran doesn't know, right?", Yasmin asked.

"No. He knows I was putting up a play for Aunt Saleha. Just like he did", said Syakirah.

"Don't you think he should know how you feel now?"

"Like I said, I 'm waiting for his decision. I was supposed to help him for Saleha's last wish. And I've fulfilled my promise".

"You could lose him".

"I know. Allah is enough for me! Hasbi Allah, Min!", syakirah responded. Sadness was written over her face as much as she wanted to keep it inside. In her heart, she kept saying "Hasbi Allah…" .

> "Allah sufficeth me. There is no God but He;
> On Him is my trust – He the Lord of the Throne
> (of Glory) Supreme!" (9:129)

****

Syakirah learned from the warden that Hidayat had been sick for two days. She explained to the warden that she knew Hidayat's family. They took him to the hospital. The doctor asked him to stay for 2 days for further check-up. Syakirah called Imran who promised to come to KL on the first flight the next morning.

"I talked to the doctor. He said Hidayat's fine. He must have missed his mother. His friend said he was talking in his sleep. I think he needs rest. The semester break is coming in two weeks time. I'll keep an eye on him, InshaAllah."

"I'll come again this weekend and maybe I could stay, InshaAllah."

"InshaAllah. That would be good for him to have family around. I was surprised to see him yesterday. The last time I saw him he was fine."

"Yes, I remember he was cheerful during the dinner at your house".

Suddenly there was a short pause. Both remembered Imran went to the resort the day after the dinner. He was supposed to come home with a decision. Syakirah wanted to ask him about the marriage but would rather wait for Imran to bring up the topic.

"If you're staying this weekend, you might need to stay at the house", Syakirah told him and Imran agreed. They were being careful with Hidayat again.

"I'll see you tomorrow morning, InshaAllah. Assalammualaikum, Syira".

"InshaAllah. Waalaikumussalam".

****

Imran called to inform Syakirah that he was coming to KL the next day with Ani. Syakirah was happy at the thought of seeing Ani again and was glad because that meant she wouldn't have to stay in the house with Imran alone during the weekend. The day he came to visit Hidayat at the hospital, he went back home on the same day.

Imran informed Syakirah that the tahlil his family wanted to hold was going to be held the weekend before the semester break ended. He had told her earlier of the week that it would be held the coming weekend, the first day of the semester break. They had changed the plan because they wanted to do it a day before Hanim's wedding. Before they hung up, he said there was something he had to hand to her from Saleha. Syakirah remembered Ani mention about Saleha's wedding gift.

Syakirah was about to do her solat when the sound of a car pulling up infront of her house. She peeped through the window and saw Imran and Ani getting out of a cab. They had asked her not to pick them up at the airport. She welcomed them in. They did solat zuhur together before eating lunch. At 3 p.m. they left in Syakirah's car to pick up Hidayat for a visit to Bukit Cerakah.

Hidayat was really happy to be in the company of the three of them. Imran was teasing him for looking like a small kid having fun.

"Of course. It's not like everyday I get to be together with you and Kak Syira", he said smilingly at Syakirah.

"And me?", asked Ani pretending to feel neglected.

"And you too Aunt Ani. You know I always like your company", replied Hidayat. The four of them talked about Hidayat's writing and Hanim's coming wedding.

"Mom would be happy to be here with us. And soon to see Kak Hanim married", Hidayat said. His face looked sad.

"Yes. But she'd be happier to see you happy with us and soon with Hanim's marriage", Imran cheered him. Hidayat smiled at his brother.

Syakirah was glad to see the improvement in Hidayat since the day he was discharged from the hospital. She had never thought Hidayat would be affected this much by the death. All this while she only knew Hidayat as a happy, jovial and hard working youth. Now these two weeks she had learned a new side of her young brother-in-law.

"So, where are we going tomorrow?", asked Hidayat.

"Our flight is at 3 p.m. Wherever you want to go in the morning… that is if Sunday isn't your sleeping late day", teased Imran.

****

Syakirah and Ani were reading the Quran in Syakirah's room when Imran and Hidayat came back from Fajr prayer at the mosque nearby. Hidayat insisted sleeping on the couch the night before. But he didn't argue much when Imran suggested they stay in Lily's old room together while Ani stayed with Syakirah. At around 10 a.m, they left the house to go sight seeing in the country as requested by Hidayat.

CHAPTER 24

Syakirah was happy to receive a call from home. Her stepmother told her that Nadhirah had given birth to a baby boy the day before. They would like to do ‘aqiqah ceremony for the baby. She promised to be home after Hanim's wedding. Her parents asked her to invite Imran. She said she would see to it.

Syakirah asked Yasmin to send her at the airport at 3 p.m to go to JB. Since that was the last day of school before semester break, some classes had been replaced on Thursday. So, students could leave for home on Friday morning. Hidayat left early that morning by bus with some of his friends. Syakirah had asked him if he would want to come with her, but he said he had made a promise to go home by bus with his friends.

"Syira, I hope when you come back after the break, things would be settled either way. In sha Allah", said Yasmin at the airport.

"In sha Allah", responded Syakirah.

"I just want my friend back. The one who is happy and high spirited to start the second half of the semester", added Yasmin.

They looked at each other. Yasmin smiled at Syakirah who then said, "In sha Allah. I've missed that myself too".

****

Imran picked her up at the airport. They asked about each other. Imran told her Hanim wanted her to be the bridesmaid. She agreed to it. Imran said they would talk about the plan that night before the tahlil. Syakirah was glad because now the sign that the ending was about to come finally appeared. She pushed aside any thoughts of what his decision might be. She wanted to leave it all to Allah. They discussed about the tahlil and Hanim's wedding.

Hanim was happy to see Syakirah. She spent time with Hanim, helping her with the tahlil and the wedding. It was after Maghrib and she had just finished her solat when Imran came to their room. Imran waited at the balcony while she changed.

"I'm not sure how to begin. But I guess I'll tell you something that you should know why I've made the decision I'm about to tell you", Imran began. His face was calm. He began telling Syakirah about Kaira.

Syakirah just listened. She didn't tell him that Ani had told her already about Kaira. She wanted to hear it from Imran himself.

"You still love her so much. I can tell that", responded Syakirah after Imran ended. Imran nodded.

"Whatever you decide, I'll accept and try to understand, In sha Allah".

"Syira, I….", Imran was interrupted when Hidayat called him.

"This can wait. In sha Allah, when we are not interrupted", Syakirah smiled at the second call from Hidayat.

Imran smiled in agreement. After Imran had left, she sat on the bed. Suddenly it dawned on her that Imran was not ready to commit into the marriage. It wasn't Melissa as Saleha had been worried about. It was Kaira. Syakirah did not want to hope for his love if it meant she had to compete with a dead person. She'd rather lose him now than losing him later. Imran had to get passed his past life if he wanted to begin a new one with her or anyone else. She had learned this herself.

****

The tahlil ended at around 10 p.m. Half an hour later the house had fewer people in it. Some stayed to clean up and made last few arrangments for the wedding the next day. Finally there were only a few close relatives with them. Imran asked them all to gather at the living room.

"This is something that I should have done sooner but anyway, Alhamdulillah, finally I could honor mom’s wish", Imran began. Then he stopped to pick up a box placed beside him. This was left by Mom as a gift to my wedding with Syakirah. At first I wanted to share it only with Syakirah. But there was a small note, like a short speech that she must have prepared to give when she presented the gift. After reading it, I realized she wanted to present this gift infront of this family. So, I'm honoring it now."

"Syira, come here please", Imran called Syakirah, signalling her to come to his side.

The family and relatives who stayed behind watched them. They all smiled and anxiously waited. Syakirah was nervous at what was about to happen. Imran didn't tell her about this. Could he want to tell the

family the truth and honour Saleha's wish for real? This thought crossed her mind. She quickly erased it, feeling embarrassed at her own thought.

"Here's the gift. And thank you for being with her … respecting and loving her".

Imran placed a sapphire stone ring on Syakirah's finger. She was touched by the gift. Tears started welling up in her eyes. They looked at each other. Imran smiled at her. He looked different, gentle and loving. Syakirah was embarassed for crying. She was not alone. The elder female relatives, Hanim and Marina felt touched and they were in tears too to witness this.

"I'll keep this as a memory of her. Forever, In sha Allah", Syakirah said to Imran who nodded with a smile.

As the men left, the women came to Syakirah to see the ring. Syakirah looked around for Imran but he was walking out with some relatives who were leaving.

Syakirah went to their room. Tomorrow would be Hanim's big day. She wondered what Imran was going to say in their room earlier. Allah knew the best she thought.

****

The wedding was going smoothly. It brought back the memory of her wedding to Imran. As she was remembering it, she caught a glance from Imran. Then when the 'akad was done, they caught sight of each other again and both just smiled.

Hanim was beaming with happiness. Syakirah gave her a hug to congratulate her. They both had tears as they remembered Saleha who would be the happiest to be there.

Syakirah promised Hanim that she'd stay until the next day. Then she had to go back to KL before leaving for KB. Hanim understood and hoped to see Syakirah again.

Imran accepted the invitation to the ‘aqiqah ceremony at his in-laws' house but said that he would have to come back on the same day. Syakirah understood knowing the wedding occasion and he was the man of the house. She was glad Imran was thoughtful to accept her parents' invitation despite his busy schedule.

Imran drove Syakirah to the airport. He didn't mention about their unfinished talk the night before and Syakirah didn't want to push him either. Somehow she wanted to hold off whatever Imran wanted to say. She was still touched by what had taken place after the tahlil. As she was sitting there beside Imran, the ring on her finger caught her attention. She looked at it and Imran noticed her admiring the ring.

"She had it all planned", said Imran.

"Yes and she'd be happy yesterday to see Hanim", added Syakirah.

"But we should be grateful to Allah for as much as she had done to leave us with", Imran said.

Syakirah looked at him. She could not really understand what he meant. Was he referring to their marriage and wanted to keep it? She dared not ask him for it might be the opposite. She felt too close to Saleha after receiving the ring to think of the possibility that she would have to leave the family when the marriage was dissolved. Imran did not bring up their unfinished talk. He could have guessed how Syakirah felt after giving her the ring. This was what Syakirah thought in her mind.

Before Syakirah boarded the plane, Imran promised to meet her in KB the next day. He looked warmthly at Syakirah and they parted with a smile.

****

Imran was in his study room when Umar called him. They had not had the chance to talk long since Imran came back from the resort.

"All went well with the wedding. Alhamdulillah", said Imran.

"And what about your wedding?", asked Umar.

Imran told him about his meeting with their old friend, Izwan. He explained to Umar what Izwan had said.

"Izwan is right", Umar gave his opinion.

"But would she want the same thing?", Imran questioned.

"Did you ask her?", asked Umar in return.

"Not yet", answered Imran calmly.

"She was there for three days. You didn't ask her? Are you afraid she will say no?". Umar was a little disbelieved by what he had heard.

"We did talk. I told her about Kaira. I gave her the gift my mother picked for her."

"But you didn't ask her?…Oh, Imran. From the way you talk, seems like you want to keep the marriage. But why hesitate?", asked Umar with a pity look for Imran written over his face.

"I'm not sure how I feel…and…Kaira….", Imran paused at the mention of Kaira's name.

"Let go of her, Imran. It's no use hanging on to the past if you have decided to move to the future. You can keep her with you. Nothing wrong with that. She was part of your life. But keep her in memory while living your life in reality".

"I can't lose someone I love again"

"You mean Syira?"

Silence.

"Imran, Kaira died as Allah had ordained it to happen. Just like your mother and father. Syira is alive. Being afraid to lose before actually having it means losing it forever. Have faith Imran! I know you better that this"

"I guess I don't have the courage when it comes to matters of love and hearts".

"But you have faith. Seek guidance in Allah".

"I'm going to see her again tomorrow, In sha Allah', Imran said and explained about the invitation.

"Good. Ask her then. But make sure you're ready to leave Kaira behind. I know it will be hard because you're so used to living with the memory. But I see here that you are starting to see you could love someone again. So, don't hold off. You've taken a long time. I just don't want Syira to leave you before you know it."

"In sha Allah, I will do what's best", responded Imran.

"In sha Allah".

After Umar had left, Imran sat in the big chair in the study room, his favorite chair by the window. He thought about Kaira, his mother and Syakirah. His mother had loved both women. Saleha had never really met and knew Kaira but she had learned to love Kaira through Imran. Imran admitted to himself that Syakirah did have some qualities that Kaira had. Her passion in work, gentleness in dealing with people whom she cared and respected, and her religious background, all reminded him sometimes of Kaira. May be this was what made Saleha chose her to matchmake her with him. Saleha had heard all these qualities of Kaira from Imran for many years. And Syakirah matched perfectly with these qualities though she was different from Kaira in some ways. He remembered saying Syakirah was gutsy and out spoken with her ideas when ticked off. This thought brought a smile to his face. He had not seen this lately in her. Could she be holding off her feeling for respecting his wish in needing time?

****

Syakirah picked Imran at the airport as promised. As they were talking about the 'aqiqah ceremony, Syakirah told him her parents knew the plan. But the rest of the family and others did not.

"I just want to make sure that we're acting right infront of them", Syakirah said.

Imran glanced at her.

"Thank you for being patient with me, Syira", Imran said.

Syakirah nodded.

" I must be the most selfish man you've ever met", Imran continued. A small laugh escaped his mouth.

"For asking me to wait?", asked Syakirah.

"For making you do all these since getting you involved in the plan"

"I did it because I want to… because I love your mother. And now, because I respect your feeling"

"Am I entitled to that respect for asking so much from you… for taking up your time?"

"What are you trying to say here, Imran?"

"This marriage of ours."

"Yes?", Syira felt like a bomb was about to be dropped.

"I have thought about it. Honestly I wanted to keep it and we know it's because of my mother. But I need to learn to want it for myself. We can't stay like this in a marriage if we want to keep it. It won't work. It would be wrong and unfair for either of us"

"I agree. So?"

"I'm asking you again here".

"Yes?", asked Syakirah.

"Remember you said about us being friends?", Imran asked.

Syakirah nodded.

"I want us to be friends but keep the wedding".

"A trial marriage?", asked Syakirah again.

"Whatever you want to call it. But if you want out I would understand".

"Let's back off a little. We've been talking about the marriage, your mother and your choices. We missed one point here", said Syakirah.

Imran remembered his comment on Syakirah being gutsy and over-reacting..

"That I never asked how you feel about this marriage?", Imran guessed with confidence.

Syakirah nodded but surprised he could guess it.

"Yes, since I'm the partner in the contract", Syakirah pointed out.

"Absolutely yes", agreed Imran.

"Honestly, being part of this wedding plan has changed me a lot, Imran. You know I've always and will always love your mother. So, to walk way from this wedding feels like walking away from her. And to be frank, I've learned to know and respect you, Imran. In matters of love we ask the heart, but here I would be using my head to reason out like this in keeping the marriage."

Syakirah hid her feeling for Imran. She knew he was not ready for a real commitment. She herself doubted her feeling sometimes when she thought of her attachment to Saleha. Her feeling for Imran and her love for saleha were blended in this marriage. As much as Imran needed time to sort out his feeling, she thought that might be what she herself needed too.

"So, do we agree to put this marriage on hold for a while? We are friends now, we don't know what's in store for us tomorrow. We are bound by this marriage. We both don't want to let it go but we both need time to keep it for real."

"True", Syakirah agreed. In her heart, she was telling herself that she would leave Allah to watch for the love she felt for Imran.

"If we're both okay with it, we leave it to Allah to decide for the rest", Imran felt determined to make it work. He needed time to make sure he was making the right decision.

> "And He hath put affection between their hearts; not if thouhadst
> spent all that is in the earth could thou have produced that affection
> but Allah hath done it; for He is Exalted in might Wise"
> (8: 63)

CHAPTER 25

Since their last meeting at Syakirah's parents' house, Imran and Syakirah had been in touch from time to time. They talked about work and Hidayat. Imran came to KL a couple of times for business. It was good because this would avoid suspicion from their families, friends and Hidayat.

Syakirah told Yasmin of what went down in JB and KB and her friend did not give much comment. She respected Syakirah's decision but knew now that her friend actually loved Imran. She could not tell Imran's feeling towards her friend. Every time they met during his visits at the college to see Hidayat, he seemed casual though Yasmin noticed he was more polite and gentle with Syakirah. The same could be

described about Syakirah's reaction towards Imran. Yasmin understood both needed more time if they wanted to keep the marriage work. She could only pray for the couple so that it would not take their whole lifetime to play the charade!

****

As in the last Language camp, Syakirah and Yasmin were teaming as advisors for the students' activities. This time the language camp would be at a seaside and the college wanted to do it earlier than the last one. They were happy with the participation of students in all language games held on the first night. Hidayat was enjoying himself getting information for his article on the Language Camp at Cerakah Camp near the beach.

Yasmin studied her friend who was chatting with some students. Syakirah was still someone's wife but she believed that it would end anytime if Imran decided he could not commit to the marriage. Yasmin remembered their discussion a week ago. Syakirah could opt for a fasakh from the Qadhi but decided to wait till Imran talked to her. She loved Imran to let him go. She'd rather wait for him to come to his decision and whatever it might be, she would accept it as Allah's decision.

> "No reason have we why we should not put our trust in Allah. Indeed He has guided us the ways we follow. We shall continuously bear with patience all the hurt You may cause us; for those who put trust should put trust in Allah" (Ibrahim: 12)

As her thought was occupied with Syakirah and Imran, Yasmin didn't realize someone was standing near her table.

"Assalamualaikum, Mrs. Yasmin!", the man greeted her.

Turning her head to the direction of the familiar voice, she was surprised to see Imran was standing infront of her with a smile.

"Waalaikumussalam…Imran…what a surprise…", responded Yasmin. She invited him to sit but Imran was looking around the canteen area.

"Searching for her?", Yasmin asked with a grin.

Imran stopped her search when he saw Syakirah who was absorbed in a discussion with the students. He turned to face Yasmin and replied, "Yes". He came to the camp with an intention but he needed Yasmin to help him get it accomplished.

"Well, must be really important if you came here looking for her", Yasmin said.

"Something that should have been done now or never. I've taken too much time already. It's time I do things right once and for all. In sha Allah", he responded.

Yasmin was not sure what he was talking about. She wanted to think of it as a final happy ending for Imran and Syakirah. But she knew it could also be the opposite.

"I'm lost here but whatever it is, it must have to do with my friend's future I think", Yasmin spit out her guess.

Imran smiled at her as if approving what she had just said. "I need to talk to Syira alone for …may be half an hour tomorrow morning. So, I was hoping you could cover for her for that much time. May be after the start of tomorrow's first activity, In sha Allah", Imran asked from Yasmin.

"No problem, In sha Allah. But aren't you going to tell her yourself tonight about it?', Yasmin asked him.

"Tomorrow, In sha Allah. Please be with me on this", Imran replied short and Yasmin nodded but still with a questioning look. Just then he saw Syakirah approaching their table. He stood up and they exchanged salams. Syakirah took her seat.

"How are you Imran?", asked Syakirah with a friendly smile. She was happy to see him. He looked better than the last time they talked. He must have come for Hidayat she thought.

"Alhamdulillah. And you?", he replied casually. He noticed Syakirah seemed happy with the unplanned meeting as so was he.

"Alhamdulillah…as you can see for yourself. Are you checking on your little brother tonight?", Syakirah asked. She sounded calm and cheerful.

"Yes and meeting you two too. I just missed tonight's campfire I guess", Imran told Syakirah and glanced at Yasmin.

"Yeah you just did. We're closing out the canteen in an hour. So, it's nice meeting you again in a language camp", Syakirah said.

"Same here", replied Imran with a smile.

Yasmin had been looking at the couple sitting with her at the table. There was a different air surrounding them she thought. The looks they gave to each other were gentle and loving. She could have misintepreted it, but she loved what she was witnessing.

"Look who's coming", Yasmin informed and they all turned to look at Hidayat.

The two brothers shook hands with salams. They both asked about each other. Then Hidayat told them about his task that night. After ten minutes, Syakirah cued Yasmin to help clean up the canteen and let the men talk. Seeing this, the two brothers insisted helping saying they could continue chatting later in the tent.

They were all collecting the cups and glasses when suddenly there was a smashing noise. Yasmin turned to the direction of the noise as did Hidayat and three other students. They saw Imran and Syakirah were stooping down. Imran abruptly took her left hand. Their eyes met.

"Did you cut yourself?", Imran asked still holding her hand.

"I'm fine..", Syakirah answered pulling her hand away gently. They were looking into each other's eyes. "Sorry, that was clumsy of me", Syakirah continued.

"Oh, it's okay…just glass. They shouldn't have used glass cups during camping", Imran responded. They both stood up. Yasmin approached them.

"Hidayat, go get a broom. That way no one gets the hand cut", Yasmin told Hidayat and turned to Syakirah, "We should have brought all plastic cups. Did you cut your hand, Syira?"

"No, I'm fine. Let's get this done", Syakirah answered feeling awkward all of a sudden.

"Are you sure?", Imran asked again looking concerned at Syakirah.

"Yes", she answered trying to avoid his look.

Hidayat came with a broom and swept the pieces. Yasmin, Syakirah and Imran continued clearing the cups and saucers from the table. When they finished, they said good night and went to their tents. Imran told Hidayat he missed sleeping in a tent with his little brother. It was a good excuse for Imran and Syakirah and not causing Hidayat to suspect anything about their marriage..

"What exactly happened just now?", Yasmin asked Syakirah curiously as they were walking to their tent.

"What? You saw it", Syakirah answered.

"Well, you looked uncomfortable for a second just now".

"We picked up the same cup so I let go of it…well, we both let go of it and it fell".

"Then why did you look tense just now?", Yasmin asked again. She couldn't see Syakirah's expression clearly because it was a little dark. But she could tell her friend was trying to hide something.

"He held my hand to see if I was hurt", Syakirah replied while Yasmin smiled in the dark.

"It was a sudden response... a quick reaction. That bothered you, Syira?", asked Yasmin still smiling in the dark.

"Well, I felt strange for a second…when he held my hand. I shouldn't react that way. I hope Hidayat didn't get suspicious", explained Syakirah.

Yasmin said in a whisper, "He's your husband, Syira…nothing wrong there!" Syakirah didn't hear it.

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Next morning Yasmin and Syakirah were still in their chalet when they heard a commotion not far from the chalet. Then there was a knock on the door. A student came informing them that there had been an accident at the beach. Two boys went swimming but were pushed into the deep water. They all ran to the beach. The college guard had saved one of the boys. They saw someone else swimming to reach the other

student. The water was rising. The boy was led to a big rock nearby. The man pulled him up on some rocks with some difficulty. The rocks were slippery. By now they noticed the man was Imran. Suddenly there was a big splash and Imran fell into the water. They all watched anxiously. He didn't show up. Yasmin and Syakirah were panicked. The guard went into the water and grabbed Imran. He was unconscious. His head was bleeding. He must have hit a stone in the water.

"We've to bring him to the nearby clinic. He's bleeding a lot", said the guard.

"I'll drive", the guard offered.

Imran was brought to the car. As Syakirah was getting into the front sit, Yasmin whispered to her that Imran came to the camp to talk to her about something. Hidayat held Imran at the back of the car.

They reached the clinic in 15 minutes. Imran was looking pale. Hidayat held Imran with a worried look on his young face. Syakirah felt like crying but did not. She felt shocked and scared at the same time. The doctors took Imran into the room and tried to stop the bleeding. One of the doctors came out and informed them that an ambulance was on its way to bring Imran to the hospital.

****

Imran had been unconscious for 5 hours since he was brought to the hospital. The family was on their way to visit him. Syakirah was talking to Ani who had just arrived at the hospital. She happened to be in KL when Syakirah thought of calling to see if she was at the boutique.

"Hidayat's with him now. I…I'm scared Aunt Ani. I don't want… to lose him…yet", Syakirah told the woman. Her eyes were glistened with tears.

Ani realized now that Syakirah seriously cared for Imran. She felt sorry for the young woman who had been like her daughter now, just like any of Saleha's children.

"Have strong faith in Allah Syira…Allah will see to it", was all she could say. Syakirah finally cried on the woman's shoulder. Ani held her.

> "Unto Allah belongeth the dominion of the heavens
> and the earth. He giveth life and He taketh it. Except
> for Him ye have no protector, nor helper" (At-Taubah: 116)

Syakirah entered Imran's room with Ani. Both were sad to see him lying on the bed. He looked like he was sleeping peacefully with the bandage around his head. The doctor said he was fine except the bleeding on his head. They would make further examination if he stayed the same after 24 hours. Ani said she would leave so that Syakirah could stay with Imran alone.

"Imran, it's me, Syira", she began and continued, "we're here… Hidayat and Aunt Ani. The others are coming soon, InshaAllah. Hanim too, InshaAllah". Iskandar said he would inform Hanim about Imran.

"You have to wake up though…I really need you to wake up", she said. A nurse came in to check on Imran. Syakirah left the room.

He left a message that he had gone to the college and would be back soon. Ani asked Syakirah to eat something. She had not eaten since that morning. Ani waited outside the room while Syakirah went to do her zuhur prayer.

There were only two women in the small praying room. She performed her obligation followed by hajat prayer. She cried softly as she was saying her du'a for Imran, her husband.

"Ya, Allah, forgive him if his time is here to meet you. Save him from complicaton if You allow him to live. I love him, ya Allah. Please save him and watch over us", Shakirah paused and sobbed.

> "I am one overcome; do thou then help" (Al-Qamar: 10).

When Syakirah came back Iskandar and Marina had arrived. They all sat around her and she explained what had happened. As she ended the explanation, Hidayat came back. The family took turn to see Imran. Hanim came two hours later with her husband. She hugged Syakirah before going in to see her brother.

Syakirah invited them to go to her house if they needed to change or rest. Then, she left with Hanim, Ani and Marina. They came back to the hospital after Maghrib. Imran was still unconscious. Iskandar and Marina decided to check-in at the nearby hotel. Hanim and her husband followed them. Ani went with Hidayat to get something to drink. Syakirah insisted on staying with Imran instead.

"Assalamualaikum, Imran. It's me again. I wish I could do something to help you wake up. But I could only pray for you", Syakirah said in a sad voice trying to calm herself of the heaviness in her heart. She had to put strong faith in Allah.

> "O ye who believe! Seek help with patient, perseverence
> and prayer for Allah is those who patiently persevere" (2:153)

She watched him. He still looked like the last time she saw him, sleeping peacefully. She moved her hand to touch his. They were legally married and that would be Islamically permissible. She brushed it softly hoping that he could feel it and would wake up. Nothing changed. She left.

****

It was almost Fajr when Syakirah woke up from her sleep. She checked on Imran but he looked the same. The doctor would come for further examination later if he still didn't wake up. She went outside and saw Iskandar, Hidayat and Hanim's husband sleeping. The wives stayed at the hotel with Ani. Syakirah remembered her parents would be there soon. So, she woke the men up and told them she had to leave. She went home to get ready to pick them at the airport.

Umar arrived at 9.30 after taking the first morning flight. Iskandar had called him about the accident before the family left for KL. Umar could not come sooner. After meeting with Imran's family, he went in to see Imran. Umar was asked not to stay long because the doctor was coming to do further examination on Imran since 24 hours had passed by.

Umar was about to leave when he heard Imran calling Syakirah's name. Umar approached him and he finally opened his eyes. He told Imran about the accident and what he witnessed just a moment before.

"I know you're in no condition to discuss about this, but I just want to let you know that what you feel for her is real. You love her, Imran". Umar did not know that Imran was at the camp to see Syakirah to tell her that he had finally decided to make the marriage work. Umar had just reaffirmed Imran's feeling for Syakirah.

****

Syakirah returned to the hospital with her parents at 11 a.m. She saw the whole family and Ani gather outside Imran's room. She had thought for the worst until, Hanim saw her. Her sister-in-law smiled at her and broke the good news. Syakirah felt relief. They hugged. Her parents were happy for her. They were touched to see Syakirah really cared for the man who was their son-in-law only on paper.

Syakirah went in to see Imran with her parents. He was sleeping again. They stayed for a while and left. Everyone left to get some air. Her parents followed Hanim and her husband to Syakirah's house. Syakirah excused herself to make a inform Yasmin of the good news. Umar and Ani watched how much Syira actually cared for Imran. Umar told Ani what he saw in Imran's room earlier. Ani agreed that these two people actually loved each other.

"He really loves his wife…and I mean his present wife", Umar said.

"Yes. It was hard enough for Imran to accept another woman. Now that he has, I'm happy for him. Alhamdulillah. His mother would be happy too", Ani added.

"It took him so long to finally come to his senses, but in the end Allah made it happen", continued Umar.

"Yes. Alhamdulillah".

> "And He hath put affection between their hearts; not if thouhadst

spent all that is in the earth could thou have produced that affection
but Allah hath done it; for He is Exalted in might Wise"
(8: 63)

CHAPTER 26

"And among His signs is this that He created for you mates
among yourselves that ye may dwell in tranquility with them
and He has put love and Mercy between your (hearts); verily
in that are signs for those who reflects" (Al-Rum: 21)

Syakirah was about to leave when Imran woke up and saw her leaving.

"Please stay", he weakly told her. Syakirah was surprised and turned around to look at him. She walked to his bed. Imran looked into her eyes. He saw tears in them. Slowly Syakirah sat on the chair. Then she bent her head not wanting Imran to see the tears welling up in her own eyes.

"I have something to tell you", began Imran.

"Yes...", Syakirah finally said.

"I dreamed that …I was going to die. I saw my parents and …Kaira but they didn't want me with them. And I cried. I begged them to let me be with them. My mother took my hand and smiled at me. She made me turn around. Then I saw you there. You were smiling at me...holding out your hand. D'you know… the whole time I was lying here...I heard everything you said to me. I wanted to talk back but I couldn't move a muscle."

"I was so afraid. I almost…lost you", Syakirah said and a tear fell.

"Now you know. I'm still here. Alhamdulillah… You know what I want to do when I'm out of here?", Imran asked Syakirah.

Smiling and laughing a little with teary eyes, "Take a long camping vacation?", Syakirah replied jokingly. She was laughing lightly with tears on her face.

Staring into her eyes seriously, Imran said, "I want to marry you. Marry me again, Syira".

Syakirah just looked at him. The smiling expression on her face slowly changed into a little shock and disbelief. She was speechless. Tears started to stream on her cheeks. This was the man she had been married to and he was finally asking her to marry him. And he meant it this time.

"What?" was all that Syakirah could say.

"I would get down on my knees but I'm taking doctor's order...to lie in bed...I'm a patient, remember?", Imran smiled at her.

"You...you're asking me to marry you?", Syakirah gave out a small laugh in her cry.

"I mean it. I love you Syakirah … and I want you to be my wife...I know that we're already married but…", Imran stopped as they both remembered Ani's plan.

"Ever since the first time I met you, I had this feeling that our lives would some how be entwined forever. But I kept fighting it because I didn't understand why. Then when your mother told me her wish… I thought I would fulfill it only for her sake. But I knew you would never ask me to marry you. You would agree only because of your mother".

"I was afraid to love you. I was so afraid that I might lose someone I love ....again. I love you...Syira. Will you marry me?". Imran smiled and Syakirah laughed nervously with more tears streaming down her face.

"You remember after your mother died and we were at the tahlil? All your family were there…", Syakirah asked.

"I gave you that gift from her?", Imran asked back.

"Yeah. You gave me the ring....because you said it was a gift from her for our wedding. You thanked me for all the time I spent with your mother. Do you know that....I thought that you were going to ask me to marry you again in front of everyone...to fulfill your mother's wish in a real sense. And the whole time that we were apart I always wondered how it would be different if you did. But now I know why. You weren't ready then and neither was I. I'm so ready...now". She took his hand, her husband's hand, and held it to the side of her face. "Yes. I will marry you again, Imran Hakim. And I will love you for the rest of my life, In sha Allah".

"For the longest time, In sya Allah. As God as my witness, I love you, Syira", Imran said and smiled lovingly at Syakirah.

> "And Allah gave them a reward in this world and the excellent reward
> in the Hereafter. For Allah loveth those who do good" (Al-Imran: 148)

****

Syakirah told her parents and Yasmin the good news. Her parents were surprised but happy for her. Yasmin just couldn't stop saying "Alhamdulillah" when Syakirah explained to her. Imran told Ani to tell the truth to his family, about the plan and all. They were all happy for him and Syakirah.

It was two days later that Imran had been released from the hospital. Yasmin invited them for a picnic. Imran, Syakirah and Hidayat agreed. As the guys were talking while watching the kids, Yasmin and Syakirah walked on the beach.

"Syira, I'm so happy for you. Alhamdulillah".

"Thank you, Min. I am happy...so happy. Alhamdulillah. For the first time in my life I feel something so right is happening. SubhanAllah…at night I would wake up and ask myself if all these were just dreams. Then, I'd remember it's real. And I just repeat Alhamdulillah again and again", Syakirah said.

Yasmin looked happily at her friend. Then they both looked at the men in their lives. Imran was talking to Nik, while Hidayat was playing with Ridhwan and his little sister Aisha. As Syakirah and Yasmin were walking towards the men, Nik left Imran to talk to Yasmin. Syakirah left them and went to Imran.

"Hey, enjoying yourself?", Syakirah asked Imran as she reached Imran.

"Yeah. Alhamdulillah! I'm on top of the world", Imran said smilingly as he got up. "Let's go sit over there", Imran said pointing towards the stone bench nearby.

"You know what? Last night I was talking to Hidayat and he said something that really touched my heart...", Imran paused and continued. "He said I waited too long to finally come to my senses...Alhamdulillah I wasn’t too late".

Syakirah looked intently at the man whom she had been married to for the last couple of months but was about to marry again.

"Allah made me finally search for the truth about my feeling", Imran continued.

Syakirah smiled at him. "Is this real?", she asked.

"Yes it is. I never thought this would happen. Now I'm grateful to Allah for showing me the way to you", Imran paused and looked seriously at Syakirah. Then he got down his knees.

"What?", asked Syakirah nervously happy.

"Would you...be my wife?", asked Imran with honesty written on his face. He looked like a little innocent boy. His voice was deep and it touched Syakirah to her heart.

Syakirah's eyes were teary as she smiled. "I can't believe you're asking me this again. We're already married and I'm about to marry you again tomorrow, In shaAllah".

"I just want to make sure", Imran said to Syakirah still intently looking at her.

"Yes, In sha Allah…yes, you know I'd be you wife". They both smiled happily.

****

The wedding went smoothly at the mosque in KL. Only people who were at the hospital to visit Imran were there – his brothers, sister, in-laws, Ani, Syakirah’s parents and Yasmin with her husband. To their relatives they had been married since the day Saleha died. This was a personal ocassion to reaffirm their marriage.

Everyone was touched to see them finally “married” – with their hearts and minds, not just on a piece of certificate. Saleha would be the happiest thought Ani. Not only did Imran have someone to look after him, but he had eventually moved on with his life with the memory of Kaira behind. He did not have to live the memory but keep it to live his life.

After the 'akad, Yasmin caught the exchanged look between the newlyweds. She felt so grateful to Allah that Syakirah could again trust a man enough to love and marry him. A new chapter had just begun and Yasmin prayed the couple’s life would be filled with happy moments.

The two families gathered at Syakirah's house after the wedding. Syakirah's parents were staying at their daughter’s place since they were leaving the next day. Syakirah and Imran would be staying at the hotel Imran had stayed before the wedding ceremony at the mosque. The others wanted to leave later that afternoon. It was their plan to leave the two married people together. They said both of them had wasted enough of their time already!

****

After sending off people at the airport, Imran took his wife to the hotel he had been staying for the last 24 hours. They checked in a new room. When they got to the room, it was almost Maghrib. Imran made a quick call while Syakirah prepared for prayer.

She waited for him to enter the room to do their Maghrib prayer together. After the prayer, she kissed his hand. They looked at each other lovingly.

“I’ve a surprise for you! Be ready but stay in here. Come out only when I knock! I’ll be right back, In sha Allah”, Imran said and left Syakirah still in her praying clothes in their bedroom. She was perplexed but anxiously prepared herself for the surprise.

At about 8 p.m., Imran knocked on the bedroom door. Syakirah came out. She wore her blue long dress and Imran in her casual attire. He was awed to see his wife for the first time without her hijab.

Syakirah was smiling at him and was delighted to see what was infront of them. The room was filled with flowers and there was a special dinner waiting for them!

CHAPTER 27

The last few months were blissful for Imran and Syakirah. Though they were apart because of their careers they talked to each other every night by telephone. Syakirah had voiced her thought to move to JB for good but Imran asked her to consider it thoroughly because he knew she loved teaching at the college.

"Imran, I feel like we're a couple of school kids in love. You know...hanging on the phone. I never thought I would go through this again".

"Oh, who was that first guy...who had captured my wife's heart first before me?"

"Honey...do I detect some jealousy here?"

"Well... the thought that someone loved you and you loving him back...even though it was in the past...?"

Syakirah laughed. "Well, he was someone from school, my senior. I had a big crush on him and we became friends until I went to college. Anyway it didn't work out. I was too young, so I was devastated until...". Imran interrupted her, "...until Manaf".

"Yeah...well, that's all in the past. I want to concentrate on the present and future, In sha Allah." Syakirah had told him about Manaf a few days before when Imran was telling her more about Kaira.

"Now that you mentioned it, are you still coming to JB for the seminar next week?", asked Imran.

"Well, yes. I wouldn't want to miss it. I've been looking forward to attending that seminar for months. As soon as I'm done with marking the final papers...".

"Really? I thought it was because you miss me and want to see your husband... but if the seminar is more important, then...fine with me...", Imran said in a slow voice pretending to be hurt.

In a flirting voice, "Oh, honey...I'm sorry...of course I miss you. I miss you so much but you know how important that seminar is for me".

"I know...and I miss you too", Imran responded.

After the call, Imran sat in the study room and the thought visited him again. Living apart meant a lot of commute from KL to JB. This scared him. The tragedy with Kaira had been hauting him more and more. He prayed to Allah to get passed this.

“I put my trust in Allah”, he calmed himself.

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A week later, Syakirah and two other English lecturers left for the seminar in JB. She called Imran the morning before they started the trip. Imran had told her to take the flight but she insisted on taking the college's transport. He was worried for her safety because it had been raining for the past couple of days. He had to stop himself many times from thinking about what had happened to Kaira. He kept telling himself that it wouldn't happen again...not this time.

Imran bought her a cell phone a week before so that she could call him through out the journey. Syakirah did not like the idea of calling him during the journey but Imran insisted. He was so serious and Syakirah did not have the heart to refuse.

Syakirah called him when the group stopped for lunch. Imran was anxiously waiting for the call when he heard the phone rang.

"Hello. Honey, it's me".

"Alhamdulillah you called. Ten more seconds then I would be the one calling you. So, where are you guys now?".

"We're in Seremban taking a short break for lunch. We can't go faster because it's still raining. I'm glad we have a good and very careful driver. In sha Allah, we will get there before 5 p.m.".

"In sha Allah, I'll be in my office until 6 p.m. Call me once you get here, In sha Allah".

"I will, In sha Allah.... and honey, try not to worry. Everything will be fine, In sha Allah. I can't wait to see you".

"Me too but I cannot not worry. Just be careful, In sha Allah. Tell that to the driver. He's driving my wife".

Syakirah laughed and kept reassuring Imran not to worry. After the call, Imran tried to continue with his work but he just could not concentrate. He called Umar to stop by his office after work and Umar agreed. At 2 p.m. the representatives from Johan & Company arrived for an appointment. The business discussion took away his worry. While they were discussing, the phone on his table rang. It was almost 4 p.m. He calmed himself telling that it must be Syakirah. But, he remembered again, it could not be her, because he had told her to call his cell phone. He picked up the phone and his heart stopped when his secretary said it was a call from the police.

"Hello".

"Hello, is this Mr. Imran Hakim Mohd. Kamal?", a male voice on the other end of the line asked.

"Yes".

"Mr Imran, I'm sorry. I'm afraid we have bad news for you. There has been an accident. We need you to come to the hospital...". The rest of the things said had been kind of blurry to Imran. He put down the phone and fell to his chair. The two representatives watched him and asked what was wrong. Imran could not speak. One of them went to the secretary and later they left. The secretary came into Imran's office.

"I'm sorry about your wife. Do you want me to call Mr. Iskandar?", the secretary looked sympathetically at Imran. Imran nodded and still stared at the telephone. Right then Umar entered his office. The secretary told him what had happened. Umar looked at Imran whose face was in horror.

"Umar it's happening all over again. What am I going to do now? I can't lose her Umar...not again", Imran broke down. Umar came to his side and squeezed his shoulder. Tears started to stream down Imran's face. Umar felt so sad for his best friend.

"Imran, remember Allah and have strong faith that He will see to it. You've got to be brave. We'll go to the hospital and see first. I'm sure everything is going to be fine as soon as we get there, In sha Allah. Just pray to Allah, pal".

Umar walked Imran out of his office. They met Iskandar who looked sad. He hugged his brother.

"Imran, I'm so sorry...".

Iskandar asked Umar to drive to the hospital. He would take care of other things. On the way to the hospital, Imran was silent, as if still in shock. Umar was worried and kept reassuring Imran that Syakirah would make it through.

Fifteen minutes later they entered the emergency room and saw two police officers there.

"I'm Imran Hakim...you called me about an accident...Syakirah Sulaiman? Where is she? Is she...", Imran was interrupted by the officer.

"Calm down Mr. Imran. She's in the trauma 1 room. The doctors are working on her. It seems that she suffered head injury and some cuts on her arms and legs."

"How....when did this happen?"

"From what we've learned, it took place around 3 p.m. Just 5 km from JB. It was raining hard. A van skidded and went out of control. It collided with their Pajero. Luckily we found your business card in her purse. One of her friends told us that you're her husband". Imran closed his eyes and ran his hand through his hair. The police officer asked for his signature for confirmation.

When the police left, Imran and Umar went to sit on the chairs outside Syakirah's room. His head bent and his hands on his head. His eyes were welled up with tears. All he could hear was the officer's words "...she suffered head injury..." and he began to flashback the accident he and Kaira were involved in. The painful memory came rushing to his mind. He was in his own world now. He didn't hear Umar talking to him. He felt numbed. Then he heard the door of trauma 1 room opened. He got up and approached the doctor.

"Doctor, is she going to make it?"

"And you are...?"

"I'm her husband."

"We really cannot say much yet. We've done what we could but she needs an operation. She had a concussion and an internal bleeding. We can do the operation as soon as we get your consent".

"Yes, I'll sign the paperwork…help her, doctor".

"We'll do our best, Mr. Imran. The rest is in Allah's hands. We have to pray to Him".

"Can I see her?"

"Just for a few minutes. We've to get her ready for the operation".

Umar watched as Imran followed the doctor into the trauma 1 room. "Be quick, Sir", a nurse told Imran as he approached Syakirah.

"Sweetheart, you have to be strong and fight this. Remember your promise to love me for the rest of our lives, In sha Allah. I don't want you to break your promise. I love you". He held Syakirah's hand and flashed back to the time he proposed to Syakirah when he was in the hospital. She promised to love him for the rest of their lives.

A nurse came and told him that it was time to take her for x-ray before the operation. Reluctantly Imran left the room.

Umar came to ask him to go to the nurse's station to fill in the paperwork. Later they saw the orderlies wheeled Syakirah into the operation room. Imran went to them and asked them to stop for a second. He approached her and whispered, "Syira, I'll be here when you wake up. Remember the promise...I love you". "Don't leave me yet", he added. He stood there watching until the doors of the operation room were closed.

"Imran, let's go and sit for a while", Umar motioned Imran to the couch near the nurse's station. He followed Umar but then stopped.

"Umar, I can't just sit..."

"There's nothing we can do right now Imran. Just pray to Allah she will pull through this", Umar tried to calm his friend.

"She has to Umar...she has...I...I can't lose her....not again".

"I know, we'll all pray for her". Umar had not seen his friend like that before. Imran usually was able to pull himself together in a panicked situation. Bt somehow he failed that day.

Imran sat on the couch and bent his head. He covered his face with his hands. Just then Umar spotted Iskandar and Marina getting off the elevator. He left Imran and went to the couple. He explained what was going on. Iskandar and Marina sat on both sides of Imran.

"Imran, how're you holding up?, Iskandar asked. Marina looked on sadly.

"Not good...".

"I'm sorry", Marina said with tears. "Imran, the operation will take some times. Why don't you go get some air. Iskandar and I will be here while you're gone". Iskandar agreed with his wife. Imran got up and weakly walked to the elevator with Umar. They stopped at the mosque nearby the hospital. Due to the chaotic event, he felt guilty for delaying his Asar prayer. He went to pray and made du'a asking Allah to save Syakirah. They stayed until Maghrib prayer.

Two hours later they came back to the hospital but the operation was still not finished. He went to sit with Iskandar and Marina. Iskandar told him that Syakirah's parents were on their way. He also called Yasmin and Hidayat. They planned to take a flight on that night. Hanim would be there soon too. She was having a seminar in Penang when Iskandar called her office. Imran just listened to his brother. Then as if remembering something, he asked, "You guys heard anything about her two friends and the driver?".

Iskandar answered, "Yeah, while you were gone I went to ask the nurse. She said the two teachers just had minor injuries. They are in the out patient room. The driver is still in the operation room as well".

Two hours later the light above the operation room went off. Imran's heart stopped. He stood and walked towards the room. Iskandar, Marina, and Umar followed him. The doctor came out.

"How is she?"

"Alhamdulillah, we managed to stop the internal bleeding. She's stabilizing now. But she's still not out of the woods yet...still touch and go. The next 24 hours are the most critical". Imran stared at the doctor as he listened to this. Then Syakirah was wheeled out of the operation room. The doctor said she would be moved to the ICU and they would monitor her closely. Imran asked if he could stay with her. The doctor told him to wait for a couple of hours. When the doctor left, he went to the couch and sat. He closed his eyes with an excruciating pain all over his face.

"Imran, she is going to be okay, In sha Allah. And, In sha Allah, you won't lose her", Marina softly said to her brother-in-law. Imran looked at her. Iskandar touched and softly squeezed Imran's shoulder. He agreed with what his wife had said and suggested Imran go home to freshen up. His brother was right. He looked worn out. He said he would go but would be back in an hour. Umar took him home.

"Thanks Umar. I really appreciate this. Alhamdulillah. You should go home too. Your wife must be worried. I'll be fine, In sha Allah. I'll drive back to the hospital myself. Just need to take a shower", Imran tried to smile. Umar understood that his friend needed to be alone for a while.

"Okay, call me if you need anything, In sha Allah", Umar said and Imran nodded.

The helper, Mak Jah, asked if he wanted to eat dinner but Imran shook his head lightly. Tears were welling up in the old lady's eyes as she watched Imran looking exhaustingly worried and sad. She told him Hidayat called a few minutes ago. His youngest brother could not get a flight on that night. Yasmin would

take the first flight with Hidayat in the morning. After taking a shower, he did his Isya' prayer followed by hajat prayer in which he said a prayer in tears.

"Ya, Allah…I bestow my prayer upon you as a weak creature of Yours. I know whatever You decide I will have to abide. Please, ya Allah, save her…save my wife. Give me the strength to face the final decision of Yours. Keep my faith strong with me. If her time to meet You is here, if I'm going to lose her…let her die in faith…husnul khatimah. Ameen".

> "And put your trust in the Ever Living One who
> dies not, and glorifiy His Praises, and Sufficient
> is He as the All-Knower of the sin of His slaves"
> (Al-Furqan: 58)

After drinking some coffee, he called Iskandar at the hospital and Iskandar told him there was no news yet about Syakirah. Then before leaving for the hospital, he told the helper he would stay there for the night.

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Imran stepped out of the elevator to the ICU. He walked to Iskandar who then told him that Marina had left to check on the twins. Iskandar said he'd go out to get some air for a while. Imran sat outside Syakirah's room.

Half an hour later, a nurse went into Syakirah's room to check on her. Imran asked to see her. He entered Syakirah's room. Imran stared at Syakirah's pale face. Her dark hair, which was partly bound by a bandage, emphasized the contrast with her pale face. He remembered the first time seeing her without the veil on their wedding night. Imran had thought how different she looked without it. She had looked beautiful then, she was still.

"Syira I've missed you." Tears running on Imran's face. He couldn't take his eyes off of Syakirah. He sat on the chair moving it as close as possible to the bed. He held her hand to his cheek and brought it to his lips and kissed it.

Still holding his wife's hand, Imran whispered, "Syira, remember I said I was going to meet you when you get here? Here I am like I promised".

He sat there watching her. Then as he felt he could not bear looking at her like that he left the room. He saw Iskandar and told him he needed to go out for a while. He asked his brother to call his cell phone as soon as Syakirah woke up. He went to his car and sat in there. It was all coming back to him...the day he lost Kaira.

FLASHBACKS

"Kaira...?", he had asked for Kaira as soon as he was conscious. The nurse called Umar who had been waiting for 6 hours outside Imran's room. He had been unconscious when the ambulance brought him in.

Imran saw Umar entering his room and asked, "Umar?"

Umar was silent. His face was sad as he watched his friend lying on the bed. His head, right arm and left leg were bandaged. He had bruises on his face and on the other arm. Above all, Umar looked relief that his friend survived the accident.

"Umar, Kaira...?", Imran asked again in a weak voice. He searched for an answer from his friend's face.

"You're going to be okay, Imran".

"Where am I?"

"You're at the hospital. You remember you were in an accident?"

Imran nodded slightly. "Where's Kaira?"

"She's okay. You need to get better, Imran. I'll see what I can find out about Kaira".

Imran remembered he fell asleep after that. The next time he woke up, Ita and Izwan were sitting beside his bed. He saw Ita crying.

"Kaira...?", Imran asked Izwan.

"They tried their best Imran..."

"No..no...not Kaira..", he was crying now.

"I'm so sorry, Imran. They really tried but....". Before Ita could finish, Imran was screaming Kaira's name. Then a doctor and a nurse came in. He was given a shot to calm him down.

The next day Umar came with Izwan. He was told that Tamrin died on the spot and Farah died on the way to the hospital. Kaira died in the ICU after the operation. Imran was the only one survived. Their car was hit by a lorry. As he listened to this news he was sobbing, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry Kaira...". He felt badly responsible and blamed himself for the accident.

END OF FLASHBACK

Imran placed his hands on the steering of the car and bent his head down. He was sobbing. The memory, which he had kept away for so long, resurfaced.

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An hour later he stepped out of the elevator. He saw Iskandar talking to Syakirah's father who was obviously looking sad. He approached his father-in-law and asked when the old man had arrived.

Syakirah's father answered, "About half an hour ago, son. How're you holding up?"

"Not so good. Have you seen her, Dad?".

"Your mother's with her right now. I went in for a while. They only allow one person at a time. She looked...", Syakirah's father choked up and could not continued. Imran grasped his arm and nodded as he understood the old man's feeling. Then, Syakirah's stepmother came out of the ICU room. She was crying softly and went to sit next to her husband.

"Mom", Imran called softly.

"Imran, she looked so pale and weak. I...I can't bear seeing her like that", Syakirah's stepmother said and buried her face on her husband's shoulder.

"Imran, you go ahead and see her", Syakirah's father told him.

Imran nodded. "Iskandar, why don't you take them home. It's past midnight. You two must be tired. You could use some rest yourself, Iskandar". Imran went into Syakirah's room as the three people left.

"Assalamualaikum, honey. It's me again". He sat there holding her hand. Just then a nurse came in to check. Imran said, "She hasn't moved".

"I'm going to check her up. Would you...". Reluctantly Imran let himself out of Syakirah's room. He sat outside her room with his head down. He stared at the floor. A few minutes later, he heard footsteps and looked up. He saw Hanim. She rushed to her brother and they held each other. Both had tears in their eyes.

"I'm so sorry Imran. I couldn't believe when I heard. I tried to come as soon as I can. I took a flight from Penang to KL but had to take a taxi to get to JB. How're you holding up?"

"Not good I guess. Thank you for coming, Alhamdulillah. I could use some company right now. Hidayat would be here tomorrow, In sha Allah. He's taking a flight with Yasmin".

"Hidayat must be worried sick. Iskandar told me Hidayat was taking a test when he called Yasmin".

"Yes", Imran said nodding.

"Imran, she'll be fine, In sha Allah. She will pull through this, In sha Allah..."

"I'm praying for that, Hanim. I can't lose her...I won't, In sha Allah". Hanim could see the pain in her brother's eyes as he was saying this. She knew how much this whole thing brought back the tragic memory with Kaira. Hanim was very young then but she remembered it. His brother had lost Kaira forever.

"I know, Abang Imran", Hanim said and held her brother.

The nurse came out and Imran motioned Hanim to see Syakirah. Hanim walked into the room.

"Kak Syira, you have to fight this. We all love you and don't want to lose you. Abang Imran is hurting so much right now. If only you knew. You must wake up and see him. He can't lose you like he lost Kak Kaira". Hanim wiped the tears on her face as she was saying this to the motionless Syakirah. She could not imagine how her brother would cope with losing another wife. Imran had just regained his confidence to believe that he could love again after Kaira. She held Syakirah's hand. "This is a test from Allah for my brother…I really hope you could hear me, Sis". Hanim stayed for a while praying to Allah to save her sister-in-law. She decided to accompany Imran for a while before heading home to get some rest and meet Syakirah's parents.

After Hanim had left, Imran went into Syakirah's room for a while. Then, he fell asleep on the couch outside Syakirah's room. He woke up at 4 a.m when he heard some noise. He saw the nurse rushing into Syakirah's room. He got panicked and went to ask the nurse at the nurse's station. He was told that her vital sign was flattening but she was fine now. Imran went in to sit with Syakirah until almost Fajr time. He heard someone at the door. It was a nurse. He decided to leave for Fajr prayer at the mosque nearby.

Imran reached home as Syakirah's parents were about to leave for hospital with Hanim. Later Imran called his office and talked to Iskandar. Umar had called him too asking about Syakirah. After breakfast he left for the hospital again. He saw Hanim alone. She told him Syakirah's parents went to the canteen. She said nothing had changed with Syakirah. Imran looked worried. It was 10 a.m. and it had been 13 hours since the operation. As they were talking, they saw Yasmin and Hidayat coming. Hanim smiled sadly to Yasmin as their eyes met. Yasmin went into Syakirah's room as Hanim walked to her younger brother who was holding Imran.

"How is she Kak Hanim?", Hidayat asked his sister. Hanim led him to the chair and explained to him what she knew.

Yasmin was in tears when she approached Syakirah. She stood very close and watched Syakirah's face. She pushed aside a few strands of hair on her forehead. Then she sat down and held Syakirah's hand.

"Hey, best friend. Assalamualaikum. You have to wake up okay. We still haven't finished our talk about the English Workbook we want to write together. Don't disappoint me, Syira. I mean it...no joke about that...", Yasmin choked with tears. "You're the best friend I've ever had...well other that my Nik. And I don't want to lose you yet. With whom am I going to complain about those students? ...and with whom am I going to trade the language lab with?". Yasmin squeezed Syakirah's hand. "Syira, your parents, brothers and sisters need you. And Imran needs you. I'm sure he is sick worrying about you. Please, wake up. Ya, Allah…make her wake up…". Yasmin said a prayer for Syakirah. Then, she wiped her tears and got up to leave. She placed a scarf near the bed on Syakirah's head to cover her hair. She went out to see Hanim and Hidayat. Hidayat got up and Yasmin nodded telling him to see Syakirah.

Hidayat entered Syakirah's room and stopped short when he saw her lying on the bed. Slowly he approached his sister-in-law.

"Assalamualaikum, Sis. You don't mind me calling you that, right? We're not at the college right now. But if you don't want me to call you that, you'd better wake up to stop me yourself". Hidayat smiled with sadness in his eyes. "You know what, we've all missed you. And I bet you know who misses you the most. He's the guy I respect the most in my life. And he's waiting for you to wake up, you know Sis". He sat beside Syakirah for awhile and made du'a for her before leaving.

Yasmin and Hidayat went to visit the other two lecturers and the driver. Imran left to make a call. As Hanim was about to leave to for the cafetaria, two nurses rushed into Syakirah's room.

"What...what's happening?", Hanim asked.

"We're not sure" was all Hanim received for an answer. She started pacing nervously. A few minutes later a doctor came and entered Syakirah's room.

"Ya Allah, please don't let anything happen to her. What am I going to tell her parents and Abang Imran. Please...", she whispered to herself. Just about then Yasmin and Hidayat came back. She stopped pacing.

"What's going on, Hanim? Why are you so nervous? Has there been a change with her?", Yasmin asked and Hanim nodded and went to sit down.

"I don't know. I was here when suddenly the nurses ran into her room. Oh Kak Yasmin...they are working on her. What if...', Hanim stopped as she saw her youngest brother. He could tell something happened from the look on Hanim's face.

"Hidayat, why don't you go and find Imran. I'll get her parents".

"I'll be here and wait", Yasmin said. Hanim ran to the canteen and Hidayat went to the elevator. A few minutes later the nurses and the doctor came out of Syakirah's room.

"Is she going to be okay?", Yasmin asked the doctor.

"Her vital sign started to flatten but she's stabilizing now. I really can't say much. We'll be watching her closely. Just pray for her".

The doctor left and Yasmin went into Syakirah's room. Syakirah still looked the same as earlier. Yasmin pulled the chair close to the side of Syakirah's bed and sat down. Yasmin held Syakirah's hand. "Syira, please fight. Don't give up yet. We need you, Syira". Yasmin heard the door opened. She turned and saw Syakirah's parents. Yasmin went out to let them be with Syakirah.

"How is she?", Imran asked Yasmin nervously as he waited to see Syakirah.

"The doctor said she's stabilizing again".

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"And put thy trust in Allah and enough is Allah
as a Disposer of affairs" (Al-Mu'min: 3)

Imran entered Syakirah's room. He stood beside Syakirah and watched her. He felt so helpless looking at his wife. He couldn't take his eyes off of her wondering if she would ever wake up. A tear fell as he held Syakirah's hand. He brushed the tear away and held her hand with both of his hands. He kissed it and then he placed it down. He rubbed her hand slowly. Suddenly Syakirah's eyes started to open slowly. Imran took her hand again and held it.

"Hi", Imran said softly trying to smile as his eyes were welling up with tears.

"Im...Imran?", she replied softly as she recognized the person sitting beside her bed.

"Yeah. It's me, honey. Salam alaikum".

Syakirah looked at Imran. "Sa..lam..alaikum. You're crying...?", she asked slowly.

"Thought I'd lost you", Imran answered as he held her hand. A few tears spilled over and he wiped them. "I'm crying because I don't want to lose you. Allah knows how scared I was. How're you feeling now?", Imran asked.

"Tired. What happened?", asked Syakirah looking directly into Imran's eyes.

"You had an accident. Remember you and your friends were on your way to the seminar? Well it was raining hard and the college Pajero had a crash with a lorry. They took you to this hospital. You've been unconscious for the last 13 hours after the operation". Imran decided to explain to Syakirah later about the driver and her two friends.

Syakirah closed her eyes and slightly nodded. "Honey, I'm sorry. I worried you", she said and a tear slid down her face.

"No, no... Don't be. I'm glad and grateful to Allah that you've survived. Alhamdulillah. I don't know what I'd do...", he could not continued and choked on the words. The thought of losing her was unbearable.

Syakirah saw the tears on her husband's face. She squeezed Imran's hand and said, "You won't, In sha Allah, you won't". She remembered how he lost Kaira.

Imran nodded and Syakirah smiled painfully. They looked into each other's eyes in silent. The pain she was suffering was a painful torment for Imran to watch.

"I'd better get the nurse and tell them you're awake", Imran said.

As he was about to leave, Syakirah said, "Don't go...I'd like to be with you for a while". Imran stayed there for a while holding her hand. She knew Imran needed to feel the assurance that she was alive and he did not lose her like he had lost Kaira. The black tragedy did not repeat itself. She believed this was Allah's way of giving Imran back his courage. He had lost it after losing Kaira. Now, he had it back.

Later Imran got up to tell the nurse. Syakirah's parents were outside waiting. He told them the good news. After the doctor and the nurse left Syakirah's room, her parents went in. Imran went to make calls to Iskandar and Umar. Later Yasmin visited Syakirah followed by Hanim and Hidayat. They could not stay longer since she was still weak but they were all happy and grateful to Allah that the nightmare was over.

"She's sleeping now", Hanim told everyone when she and Hidayat closed the door to Syakirah's room. Hanim took Yasmin and Hidayat home. Imran stayed with Syakirah's parents for a while before telling them that he had to go somewhere.

****

The surrounding at the cemetery was peaceful and quiet. The sunlight was breaking through the shady leaves from the trees. The late morning breeze swept through the branches. Imran walked towards his mother's grave, which was next to his father's. He sat near each and recited surah Al-Fatihah. Then he touched the tomb of Saleha's grave and took a deep breath.

"Mom, thank you for the advice you gave me a long time ago" Imran talked to the tomb referring to Saleha'a words of encouragement when he was at a low point after Kaira's death.

"I was so close to losing Syira. I'm so grateful to Allah for giving me the chance that I did not get with Kaira. And Mom, Alhamdulillah...through you I met Syakirah. I promise you that I will love and take care of her, InshaAllah. I know you weren't there during our second wedding but I know it made you happy and rest in peace, In sha Allah. Alhamdulillah…your wish was fulfilled".

"He who Allah leadeth, he indeed is led aright,
while he whom Allah sendeth astray they
indeed are losers" (Al-'Araf: 178)

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Almost a week had passed since the ordeal. Imran felt grateful to Allah more than ever. He survived another test from the Almighty. In fact, he had gained more through the tragedy. He was so close to losing another loved one. As scared as he had been, he was spiritually and mentally stronger and prepared to accept Allah's will with redha. Before, with Kaira, he was far too young when he faced losing her. As always and ever, there was a blessing in every event that happened in someone's life. Imran told this to himself. And a strong faith would always be the power to pull one through any ordeal in life!

Yasmin and Hidayat left a day after Syakirah regained her consciousness. Hanim, however, decided to stay for a week and her husband would be joining her later to visit the family.

Imran and Hanim drove syakirah's parents to the airport. He told his in-laws that he would drive Syakirah back to the college when she was released from the hospital. The two siblings stopped by the hospital to visit Syakirah.

"Assalamualaikum, Kak Syira", Hanim called out as they entered her room. She was up reading a book. She smiled at them and looked delighted to have them over.

"How're you today, honey?", Imran asked as they both sat on each side of Syakirah's bed.

" Alhamdulillah. I'm feeling a lot better now , but bored. The doctor said I could leave in two days. I can't stand staying here longer", she replied. "I just want to go back and teach. I've really missed my friends and students". Imran and Hanim smiled as they heard what Syakirah said.

"Well, two days are not that long, Kak Syira. Besides we'll come everyday to check on you, In sha Allah", Hanim said.

"Unless she gets bored with us…", Imran grinned and Hanim laughed.

Syakirah smiled at her husband lovingly and said, "Umm, may be…but you guys have been too good to me to not enjoy your visits". Hanim and Imran smiled back at her. "All I'm doing is stay here, eat, sleep and read. Well, I sometimes go to Pak Mat's room. He's getting better now but he still can't walk. They

haven't removed the cast from his leg. He told me that he would be transferred to GH in KL tomorrow. He misses his family. Now, that means I'll be the only one left here starting from tomorrow".

"Just hang in there, Kak Syira. When you get out from here we'll go somewhere together before you go back to KL. I'd still have one day left to stay here by then, In sha Allah", Hanim said. "Anyway, Abang Imran is a good driver, right?", Hanim gave a teasing look at her brother.

"In sha Allah. Whatever for you my ladies…", Imran said and they all laughed.

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Imran drove Syakirah back to KL. He stayed only one day with her because he had to be back for an important meeting at KS Holdings. Syakirah had made up her mind to move to JB for good. That semester would be her last semester at Pine College. She told her decision to Imran before he left for JB.

"Are you sure you won't regret this? I mean leaving the college being farther from your home", Imran asked her.

"Honey, my home is where you and I are going to build, In sha Allah", answered Syakirah.

“In sha Allah”.

They both smiled lovingly at each other.

CHAPTER 28 - Epilogue

Syakirah stood watching the peaceful night from the balcony facing the beach. The sky looked beatiful with the bright stars decorating the full moon night. She prayed to Allah to share many more nights like this for the rest of her life with Imran. Imran had taken her to his favorite resort two days after she finally settled with Imran in JB.

Imran saw his wife standing alone at the balcony and approached her. He stood close behind her. Feeling the closeness of her husband, Syakirah rested her head on his chest. He wrapped his hands around her waist and Syakirah placed her hands above his.

Softly Imran said, "Finally, we're alone and I have you for myself. No more relatives hanging around us".

They had a thanksgiving party when she moved in Imran's home. That would be their home for the rest of their lives said Imran.

"You have me for the rest of our lives, In sha Allah. I like your family and relatives. They love you".

"They love you too. And honey, I will hold on to your words. I want to have you for the rest of our lives, In sha Allah".

Syakirah turned and faced Imran. They looked into each other's eyes and smiled.

"I've always like the little boy in you. I guess I was attracted to it the first time I saw you", Syakirah said to Imran.

Imran smiled at Syakirah and responded, "I remember we almost had an argument that day".

"I said the little boy...", Syakirah repeated with a small laugh.

"Yeah?...What about the grown up in me?", asked Imran playfully.

"That too...but that part was so good at hiding your true feelings, at shielding the pain and the scar from the past. It made you look tough on the outside but beneath that tough exterior the vulnerable little boy in you was crying to be held and loved ".

"Now I have you...to hold and to love me".

"Yeah...", Syakirah smiled lovingly at her husband.

"How come you're so good at this? Was I part of your reading assignment? Or did you study me like you studied each of your student?", asked Imran teasingly.

"I guess I just do. And your mother wanted me to take care of you too".

"She did….?", her husband asked with a smile flashing his dimples.

"She didn't have to ask. I knew it the first time I saw the two of you. But you were too much to handle then".

"Am I still?"

With a flirtatious smile Syakirah answered, "Sometimes……".

Imran took Syakirah's right hand and kissed it. Then he pulled her closer and gave a soft kiss on her forehead. Syakirah rested her head on his shoulder. As they were holding each other, softly Imran whispered to her, "I love you Syakirah, my wife".

"I love you too Imran, my husband". Happiness was written on their faces.

"Thank you for making her dream come true", Imran said.

"You're welcome. Alhamdulillah. It is Allah 's play and I'm the character………we all are, honey. I really miss her".

"Me too. She gave me the best gift of my life. She gave me you", Imran said as he remembered the card in the wedding present Saleha had left for them. It said:

"I leave you to Syakirah. I'm grateful to Allah knowing that I can
finally feel happy and be at peace. Be happy my son. May Allah
bless you both forever, In sha Allah".

Love

Your Mother

"And Allah give them a reward in this world
and an excellent reward
For Allah loveth those
(Al-Imran:

THE END